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GENERAL ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

GORKY PLANT'S PRODUCTS STILL SUBSTANDARD

Moscow IZVESTIYA in Russian 26 Aug 87 p 7

Article by A. Yershov, IZVESTIYA special correspondent in Gorky: "More Claims Against Defective Products"

[Text] To tell the truth my conversations at the Gorky Machine Tool Building Association left me with a sad impression; I came here with an article entitled "A Claim for Replacement of Defective Goods" by my Prague colleague L. Kornilov. It is worthwhile when the matter concerns export products (IZVESTIYA No 226, 1987). The article contains criticism of the Gorky machine-tool builders, who shipped poor quality goods, particularly to Czechoslovakia. I would like to know what conclusions were drawn from this by the Gorkyites and what they have changed to avoid this in the future.

"The article has not yet been discussed," said association party committee secretary Yu. Zakharov. "It is true, we know the consequences and have developed measures to improve the products."

My visit to the export section where console milling machines for shipment abroad are being assembled on a conveyer is particularly pertinent to these words. V. Mulyar, chief of the section for quality inspection of machine tool building export goods gives the necessary explanations.

"The quality of the machining of parts and the assembly of basic machine tool units and aggregates is low, especially in such parameters as precision and reliability. This is why up to 40 percent of the machine tools must be returned for modification."

In the section I counted almost 15 machine tools which had received a "red light" from inspectors for numerous defects in painting alone--uneven surfaces, flaking of the primer, bad trimming of the edges, and much more. Of course, the demands for export products have increased and are very stringent, but, you see, it must not be otherwise; we represent the technical level of our country on the international market."

Recently at the association, at the insistence of workers in the inspection office for export goods quality, they held additionally a running of all machine tools at an increased rate. This became necessary because the greatest number of rejections involved various electrical devices. The assembly items shipped by the Bystrovka Electrical Plant in Kirghizia suffer from this in particular. The Gorky machine tool builders have now taken entry control of all the assemblies. Numerous controllers are participating in the processs of manufacturing the units and aggregates; the situation is the same in assembling the final machine tools, but, as you see, this is still not producing the necessary effect.

It must be said that the Gorkytes are by no means novices in export deliveries. In their time they have produced the series "R" console milling machines here, but their design was much simpler, and special problems did not arise in their manufacture. The difficulties really began with the sales, particularly abroad, and the demand for this product dropped markedly. Over two years ago the assimilation of a new, more complex product began; consumer demand both in our country and abroad turned out to be quite high. Last year alone over 700 console milling machines were exported from Gorky. But at the same time claims and complaints about product quality literally poured in from various sides.

In the discussion here we approach the main thing which explains the Gorkytes current misfortunes. Although almost 1,000 units of technological equipment had to be replaced in the existing shops during the course of renovation and preparation for the production of new machine tools, nevertheless a part of the machine tool park became obsolete, which did not allow them to achieve the necessary precision for producing parts. In the foundry shop, for example, due to violation of the temperature regimen the parts are turned out with defects, the elimination of which made it necessary to expend a lot of effort and time. It also happens this way: in the assembly of parts there is either a feast or a famine; therefore, rush work flourishes here and also tells on the quality of production. By the way, in the staff of the associations's department of technical control alone more than 230 people work, and they monitor the quality of production, and there are other services and subunits. But, it turns out, this whole army of workers is powerless if defective products leave the enterpriser as before.

These machine tools reach both the domestic and the foreign market, as it is. It is namely by this that it is possible to explain the facts which were reported by L. Kornilov from Prague. I spoke about this with the deputy general director of the Gorky Machine-Tool BUilding Association A. Malyshkov, who also heads the department of technical

control. And it was strange that my conversation partner did not perceive anything unusual in what he heard. It seems that here they are resigned to deficiencies and they don't hurry very much to overcome them. For example, spare parts for machine tools Nos. 47 and 316, about which IZVESTIYA wrote, were sent to Czechoslovakia only after several reminders from higher organs, and after much time had passed. Here is a curious detail: The purchaser notifies the Gorkyites that for the sake of speed he is prepared to pay for shipping the parts by plane, but in the association they stubbornly send all freight only by rail. This, it seems, is less trouble and simpler for the Gorkyites, but you know business can only suffer because of this.

"Now we are eliminating the defects which occurred in the last output. The measures adopted allow us to sharply improve the quality of production," A. Malyshev avers. "The number of claims has even diminished..."

This is a bold assertion, to put it mildly. In the 7 months of this year 23 claims from foreign purchasers were registered in the association. Here are only a few examples of the Gorkyites failure to meet obligations and lack of haste. On machine tool No 397, delivered to Czechoslovakia, a request to send a new drive shaft and electric clutch was received at the beginning of March, but they shipped this part only at the end of April. For machine tool No. 39 a replacement of diodes and gears was requested, but these were shipped only after three months had passed. And for machine tool No 310, a request from Czechoslovakia was registered regarding an out-of-order bearing and electric motor on 2 July, but up to now the enterprise has made no response to this legitimate request. Currently such claims against Gorky machine tools have been registered from Poland, Hungary and other countries. And as regards domestic customers, the situation is even worse--in the past year the Gorkyites received 450 claims and complaints.

It is impossible to say that, in general, measures are not being taken. At one time the question of the low quality of the Gorky machine tools was reviewed by the Ministry of Machine-Tool Building and Instrument Industry and the matter was examined by people's control; association director V. Skachkov and other managers were severely punished. In turn punishments of various kinds poured into the shops and units as if from a horn of plenty. Recently 24 persons--designers, technologists, and other workers--were punished for delivering substandard products to Japan. But such administrative measures have long failed to produce the necessary results.

There are plans to introduce state quality control in the association after the beginning of next year, but, it seems, it is not enough to

rely only on this measure to improve product quality. The main reason is that today the Gorkyites have little interest in whether their machine tools "spin around" or stand idle because of plant spoilage and defective units. And this despite the fact that there is a substantial markup on the price of a machine tool for exporting it; for the first time an enterprise has the opportunity to have its own currency with which it can in turn acquire foreign assembly parts and units and improve machine-tool quality. But here is the real situation; last year the association had to pay tens of thousands of rubles because of defective products. Unfortunately, in meetings with its managers I had occasion to hear only to promises to improve the matter of machine-tool quality in the future, including those to be exported. But, you see, you change nothing by word alone; specific practical measures are needed to overcome the continued delays of the Gorky machine-tool builders.

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OGONEK CARRIES 'REPORTER'S DIARY' FROM AFGHANISTAN

Moscow OGONEK in Russian Nos 28, 29, and 30, Jul 87

[Article by Artem Borovik: "We Will Meet at the Three Cranes"]

[No 28, Jul 87 pp 20-23]

[Text] You never know exactly how much time will pass from the moment of wounding until you begin to feel the pain.

Sometimes---a second.

Sometimes---an hour.

Sometimes---more than an eternity.

The commander of a mortar platoon, Lieutenant Slyunkov, measured this interval exactly. As he says, it took "exactly five seconds."

The "dukhi"¹ began to fire with RS's². Slyunkov glanced at his watch for an instant to clock the time between the flash of the second round which was fired and the sound which arrived. At the very same moment he felt a blow in his shoulder. A blow, but no pain.

In the hustle and bustle he paid no attention to it. He continued to follow the firing so as then to multiply by 333³ and obtain the range to the firing. However, he could not multiply: pain hit him with the roar of a locomotive tearing into a tunnel.

"I was lucky," he said, "a shoulder wound is a romantic wound."

As proof, he unbuttoned his collar and pushed his undershirt to one side.

There was little romance there.

¹ "Dukhi"--dushman.

² RS--rocket.

³ 333 meters per second--the speed of sound in the air.

Sometimes, the pain tears into you simultaneously with the fragment. And it also happens that there is none at all. It is like a thunderstorm far, far away: lightening flashed but forgot to thunder. Only suddenly you hear the squelching in the boot--the feet kept very silent. Although all around there is endless desert without limit and water.

Or you feel that the undershirt, having become wet and heavy, clung tightly to the chest, back, and side--as if it had become misty with steam. Only more than usual. A bullet hit Lieutenant Maneyev in the stomach, but he only noticed it when a soldier, embarrassed, said: "Comrade lieutenant, but you seem to have a small hole...."

"A classic case of an internal hemorrhage," Maneyev smiles. "But it's even better when the pain comes right after the wound. It's worse if there is death."

They say that you will not hear the whistle of the bullet which will kill you. But this is only what they say. In fact, you will.

Fierce battles took place near the village of Malyam-Gulyam, which is near Khanabad. An order was received to move out toward the "green zone" and close a ring around a band. But the lead platoon ran up against a "dukhi" strong point: there was no place to take cover, no place to dig in--there were only flooded rice paddies all around. The platoon leader, Lieutenant Lobachevskiy, was wounded directly in the heart.

"Believe it or not," I was told by Major Novikov, to whom the lieutenant's last words were addressed, "Lobachevskiy establishes radio communications with the CP [command post] and reports: 'Request permission to sign off. I have been killed.'"

I believed him.

The story was too improbable not to believe.

Death in war is a normal thing. It is no less commonplace than canned stew meat in a dry ration or callouses on the feet. They speak of it without ceremony. At times--with humor. (What is life /after/ death! You can answer me better, is there life /before/ death [in italics]?)

If death were endowed with reason and all its accompanying attributes such as pride and self-esteem, it necessarily would be embarrassed by such a familiar attitude toward it. War tears the halo of secrecy away from it. Look at our medical battalion and you will convince yourself: death is the heart-rending cries of the wounded; death is the silent moan of those who can no longer cry; death is the odor of promedole, alcohol, blood, and anything else which the live brain cannot define.

"Death is a bitch," Major Novikov says to us.

And he will be right.

⁴ "Green zone"--a zone of green vegetation.

"You understand," Colonel Zalomin makes more precise, clenching his temples with the middle finger and thumb, "you see, it will take the best of our youngsters...."

"And nevertheless," Colonel Peshkov whispers almost to himself, "one has to think of it. One cannot put off this question to the last days, in case of need. The thought of death should not catch you by surprise, when you are exhausted or weak."

"And what do I have to fear of it," grins Lieutenant Lukyanov, "rattling the Ilizarov apparatus, "what will be will be. Personally, it plays no grand piano for me: while I am alive, there is no death, and when it comes I will no longer be here...."

"My death," explains Warrant Officer [praporshchik] Belous who is able to present his thoughts compactly and dramatically, "can grieve anyone. But not me."

...Talking with these people, I did not stop to be amazed by that tremendous inner work which was done by the soul and brain of each of them to come to such a calm and even businesslike attitude toward death. I was amazed until I understood: the habit of thinking of death as a natural, normal and, in the last analysis, the */only/* [in italics] thing of which a person can be absolutely certain destroys any fear of it.

It is very early in the morning. 0500 hours. Perhaps early 0600. The Kunduz-Baghlan road winds like a snake between the coniform hills, winds around them, slides upward, slips downward, and hides itself from my eyes. Suddenly, somewhere quite far away its wet back shines in the sun again.

The line of mountains stretches along the horizon. Sugar-like peaks of those which, a little higher, are cut off from the bases by thin, pancake-like clouds which spread across the sky slowly, like liquid dough on a frying pan. It is almost a pastoral idyll; just a little more, and you believe that it is a high mountain resort somewhere in the Swiss Alps.

By the way, in the road atlas published 30 years ago in Kabul specially for foreign tourists travelling by automobile the province of Kunduz was also called "Afghan Switzerland." I obtained a map last summer as a gift from an old English journalist who came to Kabul for two weeks with a group of Western reporters. In addition to the map and a love of whiskey, he possessed a luxuriant head of still bay-colored hair which made him look like the classic British lion. This atlas helped him to orient himself here in the 1950's when he and his family travelled through Afghanistan in a white Jaguar. The map had become thin at the folds and, in addition to everything else was dotted with rust-colored blots of either tea or whiskey. However, this only adorned it, giving it some additional meaning. In short, a charming map. Especially now, when no one needs it. A relic of a map. A ghost of a map. It would be interesting to see my British colleague in his white Jaguar with this atlas on his knees now travelling from Kunduz to Baghlan along this very road. It would be a pretty picture.

At about 0700 hours, when the sun becomes fierce, the clouds are covered by a hardly noticeable golden crust and the road which has not yet managed to dry shines just like a roll of foil which has been unwound into a long ribbon. And if you look at it through binoculars, in an instant the eye will be nipped by the tears which are exuded.

But you only have to travel the first five meters along it and right then you understand that it, just as all the routes of Afghanistan, is a road which is covered with wounds. Its body, mutilated by mines and shells, writhes spasmodically between the cone-shaped hills.

If the road could wail from pain, I would prefer to be deaf on the Kunduz-Baghlan section.

Our two armored⁵ are moving slowly at no more than 25 kilometers per hour. We diligently bypass the holes, some of which are more like craters: the "dukhi" worked with all their hearts here. Heavy armored vehicles sway like two small boats in a seven-point ocean storm, just about ready to dip out with their side water from the Baghlan River which spins in from the right.

Our mechanic-driver, tired of twisting the steering wheel, strives to turn onto the left shoulder--it is not so dug up by mines and one can travel more rapidly here. Nothing so acts on the nerves of a Russian soldier as tortoise-like slow travel. Then Lieutenant Colonel Artemenko places his broad palm on the nape of the driver's neck which is bristly, heated by the sun, and reddish from road dust and he turns it to the right: the vehicle instantaneously steers onto the race of the road: here it seems to be a little safer, it is not very simple to push a mine beneath the asphalt. By the way, the "dukhi" also got the hang of this section. Really, in general safety in Afghanistan is subordinate as nowhere else not so much to the laws of regular military logic as to luck: you may not want to, but you become superstitious.

We rush by the disposition area of the 507th National Regiment. Just a year ago it fought on the side of counterrevolution, but recently it joined the people's authority, demanding of the government the satisfaction of a number of conditions: not to draft its fighting men into the regular army, supply the regiment with ammunition and weapons, allocate territory which it could defend from the encroachments of the dushman. The government satisfied all demands although frequently such steps are fraught with serious risk: it happened that, having replenished at the state's expense their arsenals and having received a breathing space for the restoration of forces, militarized formations of this type later again began combat operations against the regular Afghan troops and Soviet subunits.

By about 1200 hours the road had dried out and now we are dragging behind us a train of dense curling dust about 30 meters long. You cannot discern the APC which is moving behind us. Only the roar of its engine is heard. Our faces seem to have caught fire, but one need only pass a handkerchief over the brow, and the entire "sunburn" remains on it in the form of a reddish powder.

⁵ Armored--armored personnel carrier (APC).

Along the shoulders stroll asses which are indifferent to everything in this world and which are loaded in such a way that only their ears are visible, and behind them the drivers with thin rods in their hands. Looking at these animals which are loaded with many-pood sacks with rice, bundles of firewood, and some inconceivable domestic bags and baggage, I did not stop marveling at their detached, almost contemplative attitude toward life. Neither the roar of four fighter aircraft flying by 20 meters above their ears, nor the growling of the APC's which squeezed them onto the shoulders, nor the rumble of a mine which exploded nearby could bring these animals out of their taciturn calm. Perhaps they knew something which we do not know but simply took the vow of silence.

"Everyone, Baghlan, climb into the APC's!" commands Artemenko, and I quickly execute his order.

By the way, he did not have to say this: even without another's prompting you understand that you are on the approaches to Baghlan. Here for four days in a row already, shoulder to shoulder with the subunits of the 20th Afghan Division three operational groups of the MGB [Ministry of State Security] and a (tsarandoy) are holding in a compact block a Ghayur detachment which was joined by remnants of the smashed band formations which recently fired on the Tajik village of Pyandzh. According to reconnaissance data, falling into encirclement were about 350 dushman who had transformed South Baghlan into their base fortified area improved in accordance with all the laws of modern fortification science.

Last year Ghayur set out for Pakistan and, in February of this year, he returned together with several large caravans, delivering to the province of Kunduz, more exactly to the city of South Baghlan, an incalculable quantity of ammunition and weapons. He is now conducting fire with 20 PZRK [mobile antiaircraft missile system] of Chinese manufacture and five recoilless weapons. He is armed with 20 RPG's⁶, 8 mortars, machineguns, 76-mm cannon, and 1 122-mm howitzer.

A machinegun fired on our second APC, but we did not notice this because the frequent arithmetic salvos of the operating artillery almost straight up drowns out all other sounds.

Through the firing slit of the APC can be seen broken clouds of smoke floating above the city. KamAZ [Kama Motor Vehicle Plant] trucks and several Afghan buses which had been blown up on mines were frozen lifelessly along the shoulders of the road. Several hunched figures of peasants plowing the grayish-yellow ground in a valley between two mountains which had not yet managed to dry out are not at all in conflict with the roar of aimed artillery fire and the flashes of bursts. And the barber with the wooden comb and long blade in brown senile hands appears completely fantastic. He sits on a rug beneath a scraggy eucalyptus at the very road. He is frozen in anticipation of a customer. He accompanies us with a quiet, all-understanding look.

⁶ RPG--antitank rocket launcher.

If there is a road jam and we stop, in an instant an entire pack of light, broiled youngsters (in the local jargon of our soldiers--"bachat")--run up, one smaller than the other. They brandish small bags with American gasmasks and shout: "Knight commander, Ghayur--gas! Ghayur--gas!"

"They are warning us," Artamenko shouts directly in my ear, trying to overpower the racket of the engines, "that Ghayur has chemical mines in the dumps! Understand?"

I shout something with all my strength in reply, and my eyes automatically search the cabin for at least one gasmask.

"But perhaps," Artamenko bristles in my ear, "Ghayur bribed the bachat with toys to sow panic among the soldiers! Understand?"

Meanwhile, we drive up to our CP. It is situated on a small hill in a small brick house which has been smeared with clay. Living here formerly was the governor of the province of Kunduz who decided to seek a safer place to live. Twisted around the hill in a spiral is a road which leads directly to the doors. Instead of glass, which was knocked out yesterday by the wave of an explosion, smoke-colored cellophane is stretched in the windows. The ceiling and walls are finished with woven straw and rough boards, evidently from shell boxes. With each close explosion of a shell dry clayey dust seeps through the slits directly behind the collar. A wooden table stands with maps unfolded on it. Alongside--benches turned gray with time.

Opposite me sits Colonel Shekhovtsov. He is a prematurely gray, well put together person. He already has behind him considerable combat experience which is shown not only by minimum losses in the subunits (although, of course, even the loss of one human life can hardly be called minimum), the lightning-like encirclement of the Ghayur band, or the recent operation to destroy the (Ortabulaka) force, but also by the calm gray eyes which inspire confidence in success of the cause. He speaks quietly, evenly, hardly raising his slightly husky voice. In exactly the same way, he issues laconic and capacious orders by telephone, in so doing not releasing the extinguished cigaret from the straight mouth with pale lips. A lieutenant took shelter in a corner. On his head is the protective helmet of a helicopter crewman which serves simultaneously as both a helmet and a radio set.

"Among all the bands which are active in the province of Kunduz, the Ghayur band proved to be the most fiercely attuned against national reconciliation," says Shekhovtsov, turning himself away from the telephone. "After 15 January he sharply increased the number of firings against our and Afghan outposts and the peaceful villages in the area of Poi-e Khomri. Therefore, immediately after we completed the smashing of (Ortabulaka) force which had fired on Pyandzh with rockets, the decision was made to move farther to the south and block Ghayur here, in South Baghlan. He is a difficult opponent who knows our tactics well." Shekhovtsov fell to thinking for a second. "By the way, just as any former friend who turned out to be a traitor. For formerly, Ghayur was on the side of the revolution. Moreover, he studied in the Soviet Union. Later, he deserted to the camp of the dushman and, from 1980, began active combat operations on the territory of Afghanistan. He fights basely: under the fear of death he prohibits the peaceful residents to emerge from encirclement, holding them as

hostages. But all the same both our and Afghan agitation detachments are continuing to work: under the cover of fire we succeeded in rescuing from there all women, old people, and small children. Then he armed the Pathans, beginning with ten-year-olds and forcing them to fight. But the children trusted us and not him, and in two nights, surrendering their weapons, they emerged through the filtration points of the blockade.

The entrance door opens suddenly and through it is heard the increasing trying wail of a mortar round. It flies by and falls somewhere behind the CP, a little to the left. In the roar of the burst one can make out the fragmentation noise of the fragments and the clumps of dirt which are striking the walls of the governor's former residence.

A major runs in, slightly bowed and, hardly recovering his breath, turns to Shekhovtsov:

"Zolotarenko urgently requests a tank with a mine-clearing attachment.

"Take it," says Shekhovtsov, not taking his eyes from the 1:50,000, "but for no more than an hour."

The major runs off, and Shekhovtsov requests the telephone operator to connect him with "Sonata."

"'Sonata,' how do you hear me? You have gaps which are too large between the blockers--make them more compact." Into another telephone, pressing it with his shoulder and head, he says: "Think, Petrovich, a grouping of artillery and mortars so that it would be possible to conduct harassing fire against the cane and green zones. Understand? Let's do it!"

Without noticing it, at the CP I smoked half a pack of cigarettes.

Shekhovtsov comes out to send me off. Everyone is almost bent down toward the ground; only he stands erect, deeply inhaling the fresh air.

"Aren't you afraid of Ghayur's snipers?" I ask him.

"Well, to hell with them--I have yet to stoop!" Shekhovtsov squints into the sun. "Now battles are taking place from 10th to 9th and from 3d to 4th Streets: we are starting to close the vise a little. And at 1700 hours, after an artillery preparation, we will begin to take 5th and 8th Streets. For the present, there are two and a half kilometers between the jaws of the blockers, and it is necessary to close them to one: then Ghayur will have no place to disappear....

At this time the telephone crackles inside, and Shekhovtsov takes cover behind the door.

Below, right at our APC, a top of dust and sand is dancing. It is spinning ever more rapidly, twisting small pebbles and dry twigs. It dances on one leg, twisting around its axis like a prima ballerina, casting a spell over the viewer and attracting him and everyone around to its dizzy dance. It is an "afghan." We hide in the APC. If not from a shaped charge, the vehicle will protect us from the wind.

Ghayur really mutilated Baghlan with his fire. Standing are stumps of houses, lying are houses of corpses. And nothing at all remained of this clay shack. Only a memory.

The sky which has been fired on hangs overhead as a dirty, gray sackcloth. In it two white eagles are fighting silently, with frenzy. The birds are also accustomed to war.

A boy about seven years old is praying near the ruins of one of the huts. The time for anointing approached. He is doing this fervently, more correctly, not fervently. Perhaps they pray like this only in childhood.

We drive up to one of the filtration points which enter the blocking force. It consists of an APC and a loudspeaker station. I climb out of the APC to take several photos, and I feel like a tortoise who was pulled out of his shell.

One of the officers from the headquarters of the MGB tells me that the main mass of residents who are leaving the blocked zone are exiting namely through this filtration point.

"We check documents and for weapons very thoroughly. But it is a difficult matter," he says and he strokes his splendid moustache. "Ghayur bandits are trying to get out of the blockade under the guise of local peasants. Here are these two," he points to two bearded, red-haired lads about 20 years of age sitting on the shoulder. "They put on women's clothes and tried to slip through."

The lads have a rather harmless appearance. I speak to an officer about this.

"Harmless until they begin to shoot at you," he answers. "By the way, changing clothing is cunning, but it is already on the order of a hackneyed procedure: they counted on us not removing the yashmak from a woman. However, we foresaw this variation and especially invited two girls from the local MGB headquarters so they could help in such delicate cases. By the way, we ourselves quickly saw through these: even women who are very big do not wear boots size 43," and the officer nodded at the feet of the "dukhi."

I glance at the toes of the very strong, dusty boots peering out from under long women's dresses which reach the very ankles, and I think that some of the historic predecessors of these lads were luckier.

I spent about two hours at the filtration point although there was almost no work any more for the Afghan Chekists: virtually all the peaceful people had left South Baghlan. Two soldiers, yawning, guarded the unlucky "dukhi," while three others began to set fire to thickets of reeds so that at night the bandits could not approach right up to the point unnoticed. The reeds were still damp after a night downpour and the fire caught on unwillingly. By the way, there was also enough of it to get warm.

After about 40 minutes, 500 meters from us a flock of long-wool sheep began to cross the road. The animals bleated incessantly; following them were the shepherds. There were a little fewer of them than the sheep in the flock--nine men: somewhat too much for such a flock. Together with MGB Major Said Ismail, chief

of the filtration point, a person with a sad appearance but one which is like an X-ray through and through, we approached the flock, not even grabbing assault rifles: the shepherds were unarmed. On the long shirts of each of them badges "27th CPSU Congress" showed red. They smiled affably and said something to Said very quickly. The latter attentively checked their documents and then summoned three soldiers who were unsuccessfully setting fire to the ill-fated reeds. They approached and silently separated the shepherds from the flock. The sheep glanced to the sides with amazement and Said, turning quickly, seized one of them and pressed the space between the knees.

"Do you want to check their documents, too?" I joked languidly.

In reply he ripped with a knife two thick fleecy strings with which a sheep was ringed front and rear and he drew out a new assault rifle from beneath the abdomen.

"Check that one there! he shouted at me, nodding at one next to the sheep which had just been disarmed. I proved not to be as nimble, and only caught it on the second attempt. Embracing the sheep by the "waist," I felt two assault rifles without clips and a bundle of three grenades. "My simpleton was a little richer," I thought.

All the other sheep also proved to be burdened with weapons and we discovered an RPG [antitank hand grenade] on the abdomen of the largest one.

The "pastors" with all their appearance displayed surprise, and for a long time one of them was indignant at the treachery of the dushman who had decided "to exploit the naivete of peaceful shepherds for their criminal purposes."

The road to the outpost of Captain Zakharov was jammed with transport and people. And therefore, the five or six kilometers which separated it from the filtration point were covered by us in about 30 minutes.

The sky, which became darker with each passing minute, threatened a torrential downpour several times during that day. Trailing us were motley buses filled to overflowing with peasants. During the day the people grew tired and the smiles disappeared from the usually happy Afghan faces. Prior to the onset of darkness, I certainly wanted to get to the outpost and to see Zakharov. In the province of Kunduz his name is legendary and known in every village.

The outpost is located in a place which is strategically important for the "dukhi" --at the junction of several caravan routes. Monitoring this nerve center, Zakharov overlapped Ghayur's oxygen pipe--the shortest route for the delivery of ammunition, weapons, medicines, and food from Pakistan.

Even a year ago, Ghayur declared Zakharov to be his personal enemy number one, promising about 5,000 afghani for his head. It did not help. Then, under the guise of a "well-wisher" he sent to the outpost his agent with a proposal: "Desert to my side, Zakharov. I'll load with money you and all your wives.

Zakharov thanked the scout for the flattering offer, but he requested that the following be transmitted to Ghayur: "Your gold is of a poor standard. Zakharov."

"Ghayur became furious," Zakharov laughs and with satisfaction combs his round head with the closely cropped hair which Ghayur has been hunting for for so long and unsuccessfully.

We are sitting in the enlisted men's bakery and nibbling on hot, sweet and sour bread. Zakharov also has such huge hands that with one of them he can freely take a loaf and ask: "Well, guess, what do I have in my fist?" From the oven emerges delicate heat which smells of a comfortable hut and calmness. Just a little bit more, and we will finally move with him to his native village near Maykop which he recalls; we will go swimming in the river and then will thaw out. An artillery cannonade returns us to South Baghlan, to the outpost.

Last month, Ghayur tried to take Zakharov by deceit: gold did not help, cunning will!

The next "well-wisher" comes to the outpost and reports that tomorrow a large caravan with weapons will pass five kilometers from here. If the peaceful residents of the nearby villages are dear to Zakharov, he should destroy it.

"I quickly checked this information through other channels," Zakharov relates. "I have many friends among the local population and there are those who I can question. I live very well with the peasants of the local villages. I never deceive them, share food, and pass out solar oil. If someone asks me to detail security so that the peasants can plow the land peacefully, I always meet him half way. In short, people loyal to me reported that the information concerning the caravan is a lie. Ghayur's plan became clear: he wanted me to send the company's main forces to an ambush and meanwhile he would take me with bare hands. No, I think, it will not happen! I generously thanked the Ghayur 'well-wisher' and, in the evening, I simulated the departure of the company for ambush operations. But it had just grown dark, and all the lads returned. And I proved to be correct--intuition did not let me down: at night Ghayur, moving up almost 600 bandits armed to the teeth, attacked the outpost from four directions. Well, I met him accordingly--Ghayur raced all the way to Baghlan without looking back. However, he is a fellow with invention--the next time, he decided to operate by the 'opposite' method. He sent a 'well-wisher' who reported: "Respected Zakharov, tomorrow at 0500 hours Ghayur will strike your outpost with all his forces--get ready. I, as was the custom, sincerely thanked the 'well-wisher' and gave him money, flour, and firewood. And I realized to myself: 'Aha, you, Ghayur, want me to lock myself up in my fortress and you yourself meanwhile will lead the caravan through--no, brother, again it will not work!' And I was correct: the next day at exactly 0500 hours a caravan proceeded of 100 pack animals and 10 Toyota pickups--so much ammunition as to be sufficient for Ghayur for two months of active combat operations. But my lads were still bored from the night in ambush--they lay in wait for the caravan. So this is how we fight with Ghayur: whoever is more cunning will win."

On 27 May Zakharov was 28 years old. He came here a year ago. The first four months were spent on studying the territory and the customs and traditions of the local peasants, without which it is impossible to conduct successful combat operations against the "dukhi" here.

"I was lucky from the very beginning, says Zakharov, "bands did not concern me: they bickered among themselves more and more, and I clicked under cover of a caravan with weapons. The next time, Ghayur returned from Pakistan with the order to unite all the quarreling detachments into one fist and to agitate the local residents to cross the border and leave; however, no one even wanted to listen to him. Then this is what he, the scoundrel, thought up: in order to force them to leave Afghanistan he began to fire on my positions directly from the closest villages in order to cause responsive fire there. The provocations were repeated day after day, but we remained silent: we should not hit peaceful people. In addition, Ghayur to the utmost exploited the fact that I cannot mine either the paths or the caravan routes in these places, again because of the fear of wounding any of the peasants...."

Zakharov walked out of the bakery for about 10 minutes to see what is going on around. I just sat, resting my back against the warm wall, and smoked. It was almost dark outside. Heady warmth sprang from the oven. It was pleasant to inhale it, relaxing all the muscles of the body. The moon could be seen through a small window. It was like a single luminous porthole of a distant vessel standing at night in a roadstead. If you look for a long time, it seems that the vessel is moving barely noticeably.

"Again sabotage on the pipe, damn it anyway," Zakharov swore, slamming the door behind him.

One of the platoons of Zakharov's company is guarding a rather long segment of two lines of the pipeline through which we pump fuel into Afghanistan. It is no trouble to puncture it: one good blow with a sledgehammer--and there's your hole. Frequently the "dukhi" force little boys to do this, paying 100 afghani for each hole. But more often, they have recourse to a different method. Several groups of insurgents in various places go out to the lines of the pipeline and blow them up, causing large fires. In this case, they mine the approaches to the holes.

"They have most likely done this now," Zakharov explains, "to distract my forces to the extinguishing of the fire and try to bring the next convoy to Ghayur. So let us put off our talk until dawn."

The fire blazed to the utmost extent, illuminating the sleepy faces of the soldiers from the repair group. This gave the combat engineers the opportunity to work without lanterns. Clouds of smoke and soot drifted into the night sky. They found no mines, and they could thank the "dukhi" for this.

One of the soldiers standing next to me extended several crisp biscuits toward me. I poured hot tea from a water bottle over them so they would not crumble.

"Did you find something to bite?" a combat engineer, squatting, asked me.

I extended to his hand one of the biscuits which was softened and smeared with solar oil, and he accepted it to chew. A flame raged in his eyes.

Something thundered nearby, and a weak convulsion raced along the ground.

"A 122-mm howitzer," said a lieutenant colonel who emerged from the darkness. He had just arrived from the regimental CP. "Ghayur flits along the blockers in searches for a slit. We have taken 8th and 5th Streets. The Afghans are now sweeping them. The distance between both blocking groups is minimum, and it is difficult for the artillery to operate: they are almost bracketing friendly troops."

He stretched his hands forward, warming them by the fire. I took a swallow from a water bottle and passed it to the lieutenant colonel. At that moment something blazed up suddenly and accurately plowed through the aperture of the blast furnace. After about two seconds there was the report of an explosion through the noise of the rain and fire. Evidently, a recoilless weapon fired about 700 meters away.

The lieutenant colonel said that an hour ago one more band approached the blockers from the south, trying to break the encirclement to bring out Ghayur and his security. The "dukhi" used the fire in order to slip unnoticed right up to the blockade. Then, from without and within they simultaneously struck one of the junction points, but this sector was now strengthened, bringing up two platoons from the reserve. Many prisoners were taken and during the interrogation one said that Ghayur was killed.

I congratulated the lieutenant colonel

"It is typical disinformation." He drank once more from the water bottle. "It is already the second time in three days that it has been put out so we would relax the pressure. But the devil doesn't fool Vanka: Vanka himself knows the prayer to him."

By about 0300 hours the fire was extinguished, first having stopped the leak of solar oil. It was necessary to replace the punctured pipe. Now they dragged it out toward the road.

The lieutenant colonel left me at the CP and, on parting, he threw off his pea jacket:

"Here, take it, you won't freeze."

"To whom should I return it?"

In reply, he waved his hand:

"Take it for yourself. Now no one needs it...."

I crawled into the APC, along the floor linked with replete dirt, and I closed the hatch behind me so that drops of rain did not land inside. On the adjacent seat the machinegunner slept in the embryonic pose. One bright blue light burned in the cabin.. The soldier, protecting himself from the light while he slept, adjusted his green panama hat and covered his eyes.

Although it was warmer inside than outside, before lying down I put on the pea jacket, buttoning it up to a single button. The pea jacket had shoulder boards, and on each one there were four little green stars.

Henceforth, I was a captain.

I could not fall asleep for a long time and lay, listening to the calm breathing of my chance neighbor. In no way did my hands want to get warm, and I placed them in the deep pockets of the jacket. I felt a small box in the right one and pulled it out. They were British Puritabs Maxitabets. The instructions which were accurately folded several times said that each tablet can disinfect 25 liters of water: evidently, the owner of the pea jacket was required to be in combat⁷ frequently and for a long time. In the same box there lay five yellow prophylactic capsules against hepatitis. Usually, for insurance they are used by those who have already had Botkin's disease once. On the bottom of the pocket rustled sand mixed with tobacco. I brought a pinch of this mixture to the nose. It had the sweetish odor of Amphora, an English pipe tobacco which cannot be confused with any other. A red cellophane packet of Amphora can easily be bought for 300 afghani in any shop. All you need is money.

Gradually, the image of the Unknown Captain began to take form in my head. Of course, very hazily, but I already knew something about him for sure. He was a quiet, taciturn person who liked to think things over in leisure time: People of a different cast are rarely drawn to the pipe. At the elbows the sleeves were worn and dirt had eaten into the coarse material. The captain often lay in ambushes. In the back the pea jacket was also greatly threadbare and slightly torn: its former owner had to drive to his heart's content in an APC. The pockets were greatly bulging: he preferred to keep his hands there. I imagined the walk of a person about 28 years of age who thrust them deep in the pockets on a cold, dank day when he would want to raise the collar which, by the way, in the back proved to be soiled and worn along the sides in front: the Captain had a rigid bristle. The pea jacket recalled a house which was always abandoned by its inhabitants into which you dropped by chance and everywhere find traces of recent life--traces of milk which has boiled away on the ring or an open can of still moist shoe polish on the floor. What has happened with this person now, where is he? And why, in thinking of him, do I mentally use verbs in the past tense?

A mass of other questions arose in me, but there was no answer to them in the right pocket. I was not ashamed by my curiosity. In the end, it is that necessary quality of any reporter just as the ability to type on a typewriter.

In the left pocket I discovered several dried-out field flowers: was he sentimental? On the very bottom lay a scrap of paper finely written on in a small hand. All the lines were blurred, but I made out two of them in the blue light of the lantern. "...my position is silly--to be insanely in love with my own wife. All the sillier if you consider that we know each other 15 years already. I often ..."--and at the very end: "Stepunin is arriving so that a can of herring arrived with him...." Oh, if only Holmes and his friend Watson were here in the

⁷ "Combat"--in soldier jargon, combat actions.

APC: they would answer all my questions in an instant. By the way, as they say, Watson's prototype, Dr. Brighton, was in these places as part of the British Expeditionary Force. In trying to recall the dates of the Anglo-Afghan War, I felt as if I was being put to sleep by a bear.

The muffled explosions and distant firing were heard through the armor. It was as if the ears had been plugged with cotton plugs. Soon the world outside the APC lost any meaning for me, and I fell asleep with the barely glimmering thought of the Unknown Captain.

The machinegunner woke me up at 0600 hours. I opened the hatch and glanced outside. It was already light although the heavy sky which hung low above South Baghlan, just like a smoke-colored light filter, passed the sun's rays very unwillingly.

The artillery fell silent, but dense automatic fire was clearly heard behind us. The machinegunner hauled a helmet full with hot, rusty water which he had filtered from the UAZ radiator. We washed, and steam rose from our faces. Having eaten a small tin of sausage meat, I approached another APC which stood behind an embankment under a weakly stretched camouflage net which sagged from rain. Its engine was operating, and one could warm up in the sweetish-moist discharges of the fuel exhaust. An officer with soot discolorations under the eyes who was sitting on it said, in answer to my question, that he will drive right now on 6th Street. While it was still night it was in the hands of the "dukhi," but it had just been taken and Afghan combat engineers are now working there. He is setting out for there in a couple of minutes.

Sixth Street consisted of some craters filled to the edges with gray water. On the shoulders lay several dozen already disarmed antipersonnel and antitank mines, Chinese assault rifles, British rifles, several grenade launchers, and two machineguns.

The city of South Baghlan itself was like a puzzling (but already half-destroyed) labyrinth which one can encounter on the cover of any children's journal with the short caption: "Find how the rabbit makes its way out of here." It is almost as difficult to understand it as the true thoughts and attitudes of its recent inhabitants.

As we entered one of the captured dugouts, still smoking on the dirt floor were basins with pilaff. Three corpses lay just a little to the side. The hand of one of them clutched a spoon. He was just a little distant, cold, with fingers seizing an assault rifle.

A thermos stood in a corner. It was already a trophy. It was unnaturally heavy although there was no liquid in it. Valeriy Pavlovich Zalomin, one of the first to break into this street, said that one should be very cautious with such "souvenirs"--usually they are booby traps. And this is just how it turned out. Unscrewing the bottom of the thermos, I saw that the cuminum was stuck around with black Pakistan plastic explosive of increased power.

"This evening you should learn the operating mechanism of this item." Zalomin lifted a piece of the plastic explosive in his fingers. "After dinner you pour

hot tea into the thermos, the plastic explosive expands momentarily, and an explosion occurs from the increased pressure. So this would be the last tea of your life."

In all the other fortifications--permanent pillboxes, earth-and-timber emplacements, dugouts of four layers, multistoried underground dumps of weapons, and a hospital--one could sincerely be amazed at the contrivances of the bandits and the richness of their inexhaustible imagination: the soldiers found cigarette-lighter, watch, fountain-pen, and tape recorder booby traps. The deadly booby trap was concealed and camouflaged so skillfully that only a person with an eye trained for it could discern it in all these objects.

This is how the four-day battles for South Baghlan were ended. However, among the killed and wounded only one person could not be found or identified--Ghayur himself. Meanwhile, one of the goals of the operation, as it was told to me, was his capture.

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[Text] The office of the Chief of Directorate of the MGB of Kunduz Province, Colonel Abdullah Fakirzad, is ascetic to the limit. Nothing superfluous. A desk, several chairs, and a hard (perhaps, too) divan.

The colonel himself is tall and round-shouldered. His moustache is like Budyenny's.

"According to my data," he began, "Ghayur left at 0300 hours, prior to the capture of the last, 6th Street, attired in a woman's dress. I presume that he was able to slip through one of the blocks of the MGB for a large bribe. You know, here anything can happen. Especially if you consider the large percentage of recruits with low consciousness from the village population."

I told about several instances of desertion from Afghan units which occurred in the province quite recently. The colonel knew of them.

"Moreover," I noted, "the morale and political spirit in many Afghan subunits which I had the occasion to visit leaves much to be desired. Not every soldier can explain why, in the last analysis, he is fighting."

"It is a serious problem " the colonel shook his large head with the coal-black hair combed smoothly back. "Of course, there are a mass of reasons--not justifications. I will mention only one. There is not enough money; a soldier of the native army receives five times less than a rebel in Ahmadshahi's band. And the sale of personal weapons? On today's black market a pistol goes for 80,000 afghani, a kilogram of meat--I cite this for comparison--250 afghani: one can feed a family for an entire year. But we have recently adopted a number of very strict measures to stop such instances."

"Tell me," I asked, "how you imagine Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops."

The majority of the bands," he ran his hand through his black hair and it seemed to me that his palm would also become black from this, "which are fighting here beyond the zone of influence cover their banditry by talks that they are fighting the 'zhuravi'⁸. This is done to distract the eyes so that American congressmen could throw dollars into the furnace of the Afghan war with a clear conscience. When the Soviet troops depart, internecine fighting will embrace the entire territory of the country, but the ringleaders will not be able to camouflage their terror by former talks of a "holy war." Many Afghans believe that the Soviets should not depart until the bands understand each other and the mass of them change the feudal-hereditary ideology by a national ideology. You understand, counterrevolution worries you, and this fear restrains it from the initiation of broad terror."

The moustache of Colonel Abdullah Fakirzad completely covered his constantly talking mouth, and the thick beard on the third of his face which was shaved to a steel shine hardly moved here. And that is why sometimes it seemed that his speech is pouring out of eyes the color of the southern starless night.

"Now," he said after a short pause in his rather muffled, calm voice, "they are bringing here a captured mullah, one who performed the functions of judge in the villages around Imam Sahib and was famous for the rare cruelty toward those sympathetic to the revolution. In proof of this, he never held a weapon and he did not kill; the mullah will show you his delicate hands with the blue veins. But don't believe him: they are up to the elbows in blood. He killed, executed, shot, and cut off ears with his verdicts. All right, bring in the prisoner!"

But no one brought the prisoner in. He opened the door and entered himself.

The face of this small, puny person of about 50 years of age was a symbol of the highest human virtues. In greeting me, he swung the sleeve of his loose overalls almost to the shoulder. If I had not seen his face, I would have decided that these hands can belong only to a 17-year-old girl whose parents had protected her from childhood from labors, dirt, and sun. Or to a pianist who was accustomed to touch only the delicate keyboard of a grand piano.

By the way, just as all interrogations of prisoners at which I had the occasion to be present, this also proved to be boring and no less senseless. I formed the impression that all "dukhi" speak according to one scenario prepared ahead of time. I became accustomed to seeing on their overalls badges with the image of Lenin's profile and badges in the form of a red banner. I read and heard much about the religious fanaticism of these people and, therefore was always amazed at how easily they disavow Allah and pledge their love for the "faithless." I remember how in Baghram last summer we gave a captured dushman a little alcohol --he really shivered in a night ambush. The fellow drank and smiled voluptuously, asking for more. They permitted him to take what was on the table,-- canned stew meat. I then asked him:

"Is it really permissible for soldiers of Allah to drink alcohol and eat pork?"

⁸ "Zhuravi"--Soviets.

"We are under a roof--Allah will not see," he answered, pointing to the ceiling.

This mullah, who zealously vowed fidelity to the ideals of the revolution, said that the only pain which he brought to people was caused by the rites of circumcision. But this is a sacred pain.

From intelligence data, it was known that he encouraged (Ortabukali) in every way to fire on Soviet territory in the area of Pyandzh. The mullah, naturally, denied this.

"When the firing started, I decided that a battle is under way between two hostile bands," he said.

We also knew that shortly before the firing on Pyandzh he ordered the death sentence for the Kirghiz Abdullah and four of his sons who had decided to go over to the side of the people's power. This fact was widely known in the area of Imam Sahib, and the mullah could not deny it.

"I was against the execution," he said, taking a sip of already cool green tea from a gay-colored cup. But (Ortabulaki) advised me to prepare a kafan⁹ for myself if I refuse to sign the death sentence."

"Tell me how you would have proceeded, I asked, "if (Ortabulaki) forced you to judge a Russian?" Having asked this question, I imagined myself in the position of a prisoner of war and him--in the role of his judge. I began to feel a little not quite myself.

"Neither (Ortabulaki) nor Khalif ever asked me about this." He spread his delicate hands in various directions.

"You are old and wise," I said, pointing to his gray hair with my eyes. "Tell me what will be here after the departure of the Soviet troops. Speak frankly, nothing will be done to you."

Even without me, the mullah knew that he was in danger. Perhaps even greater than by himself in the village. He attentively inspected his hands from the tips of the nails to the shoulders: all the same, the sleeves were rolled.

"After the departure of the Soviets the bands will begin internecine war for the lands," he said. "No one doubts this. It will be very difficult and much peaceful blood will be spilled."

The mullah was led away. Colonel Abdullah Fakirzad slammed the door behind him and somewhat sadly smiled after the old man. He cut the end of a Cuban cigar, began to smoke and, releasing a pair of thunder clouds of rank smoke he said:

"The Kirghiz Abdullah and his four sons were shot at dawn. A bullet entered the shoulder of the youngest. At night he made his way from under the corpses of his father and brothers and reached here by dawn of the following day. This had also informed us that it was the mullah who initiated the execution."

⁹ Kafan--white material in which the deceased is wrapped prior to burial.

"Tell me," I asked the colonel, "is it true that Gulbuddin, one of the leaders of the counterrevolution now entrenched in Pakistan, was born in Kunduz? As far as I know, it is for this very reason he relates with special partiality to what is occurring in this province."

"Ask this question of Muhammed Yasin, secretary of the province party committee. The fact is that Gulbuddin and Muhammad Yasin studied together."

With this the conversation ended. I said goodbye to Colonel Fakirzad, sincerely wishing him success.

"Well, how was your talk in the MGB?" Muhammad Yasin, a round, brisk person of about 40 years, met me in his small yard.

I told him. Then I immediately asked him about Gulbuddin.

"You know, I studied with him in the same class. But then he was forced out because of homosexuality."

"Really?"

"Even then, Gulbuddin was distinguished by various escapades. He and his accomplices, seeing on the street a woman without a yashmak, sprinkled acid in her face. After this, she was forced all of her remaining life to wear the yashmak. That is how he fought for the 'purity of Islam.' In his student years Gulbuddin met with the Western teachers of local persons--they trained cadres of counterrevolution in good time. By the way, up to now Afghanistan is swarming with American, West German, and British, so to say, teachers. They are winning over recruits."

Muhammad Yasin took a short pause. Then he continued:

"I studied for four years in Romania as a graduate student. Then I was greatly attracted by the history of World War II. Sometimes it seems to me that the leaders of the counterrevolution borrowed much from Hitler. Their concept is to accustom the largest possible number of people to the crime which they call a 'holy war.' You understand, if a crime acquires a mass nature it seems to be not a crime, but the norm. At least, this is what Gulbuddin assumes. Hitler also tried to attract the maximum number of Germans to the crimes of the Wehrmacht. Well, and if a soldier begins to reflect on his deeds, something similar to a 'guilt complex' arises in him."

My partner in conversation poured strong green tea into cups and moved a small bowl of walnuts.

"If a soldier get a 'guilt complex,'" Yasin cracked a nut, "the soldier fights like one possessed. He has nothing to lose. He made his stake, his selection. But the members of the 'seven' are no ideological inspirers of counterrevolution. They are the basest rogues."

He brought out a portfolio with newspaper clippings.

"You see, the matter reached the point," he said, opening his minidossier, "where even American Congressmen began to accuse the "seven" of squandering resources and corruption. Senator Gordon Humphrey, chief defender of the interests of the counterrevolution in the American Congress, himself recently admitted that the squandering of resources reached...."

Yasin put on his glasses and bent low toward the sheets on the table:

"reached 'scandalous scales.' As a result of the swindling of my former school-mate and his friends 70 percent of the assistance granted by the United States to the rebels does not reach the addressees for whom it was intended. I ask you, where would Gulbuddin get the money to open an antique shop in the center of London, eh? Well, I don't know. More correctly, I know now."

Time was pressing me, and I had to ask one more question.

"Tell me," I asked, "and how do things stand in your province concerning national reconciliation?"

"Difficult," Yasin admitted, speaking plainly, "not as well as was intended at first. Immediately after 15 January (according to your calendar) the dushman sharply increased--four- or five-fold--the number of firings on Soviet and our garrisons. So that the military situation was aggravated. The bands even undertook the firing on Soviet territory, which formerly had not been decided upon. But it was a propaganda action. But nevertheless, we have some results in the reconciliation plan. During three months alone, about 100 armed people went over to the side of people's power." He again glanced at his dossier. "Of 433 villages in the province 290 are under our control. Elections to local organs of authority took place in 143 villages. In the district of Khanabad more than 200 rebels are now ready to create a tribal battalion. However as formerly both the "seven" and Pakistan are hindering the return of refugees. Gulbuddin personally called on the people to stay on that side of the border. And when nevertheless the real threat arose of their mass crossing of the Durand Line, Pakistan moved the 17th Tank Division closer to it and Gulbuddin spread the rumor that Najib prepared concentration camps for the returnees. All these measures did not help. Then they decided on straight bribery of people: if prior to this year each family member of the refugees received 50 calders per month regardless of age, after 15 January this sum increased by 100 calders. Earnings of the average family jumped to 10,000-12,000 afghani recalculated in our national money. And the refugees with all their hopes could never earn so much being in Afghanistan. So that everything is difficult...."

He noticeably grew gloomy, and it became awkward for me because I evidently had spoiled his mood. We parted.

...Waiting for a pair of MI-8's at the very runway, I crawled into a semi-destroyed Czech Albatros which was badly laid up. Its propellers rotated in the wind inadvertently. Inside snoring gently was a soldier who was well burned in the sun. Sitting in the pilot's seat, I smoked.

It was chilly in the airplane, the dense cigarette smoke warmed the lungs, and because of this it seemed warmer, if not to the body then at least to the spirit.

Later I moved to an airfield building. Several officers with small cans of SIP --an orange soda drink--in their hands sat and looked at television.

Pastor Shlag was fitting skis in an attentive manner. Then (Shtirlits) long rambled about Berlin. A siren began to howl and people ran to the bomb shelter. Then the artillery went into action. But not near Berlin but north of Kunduz. After about 15 minutes, when (Shtirlits) was again on the edge of a cave-in, the rumble of the "bees" settling down was heard.

Pyandzh is a small Tajik village located 300 meters from the border on the Soviet side. Three hundred meters from the war.

Never in my life did I have the occasion to see such a border. I have in mind not so much the line which designates the limits of state territory as the boundary in time, the boundary between two ways of life, two philosophies. Between peace and war. It is all the more striking if one considers that people of the same nationality--Tajiks--found themselves on different sides of it. But some are living in 1987 and under socialism, and the others--in 1366 (Moslem calendar) in a feudal system with tribal survivals, to put it scientifically. And you do not need any time machine: simply sit in an Mi-8 and ask the pilot to fly you from Kunduz to Pyandzh. That is all. The helicopter momentarily will transfer you from one coordinate system to another.

War is thundering 300 meters from Pyandzh, just like sea surf. It can be heard night and day, not letting itself be forgotten.

But the unforeseen happened: one day, it nevertheless rolled across the border and carried away from the city submerged in a sea of warm cotton fields a 25-year-old life.

...The (Ortabulaki) band began to fire on Pyandzh with rockets on 8 March at 2255 hours. But still five minutes prior to this Zaynidin Norov, a happy 25-year-old fellow with a bang of stiff black hair on his brow, sat in his room.

"He was sitting and looking at a journal. Then he threw it on the bed. I think," Zaynidin's brother said to me, "that it was a very boring journal. A smile did not leave Zaynidin's lips: he walked all evening about the city with Gulchekhra, his fiancée. They had decided to get married in May...."

The rumble shook the house to the foundation. Jumping up from a chair, Zaynidin ran out into the street. At this very second he felt a strong blow behind the shoulder blades and between them and began to collapse slowly, trying to thrust his heavy arms forward. He fell. His light, sunburned body hit the ground. He embraced it with his weakened arms and pressed it with his cheek as if he wanted to hear the last parting words.

But he never could see and hear anything more.

This occurred at 2257 hours on a starless spring night of 8 March in the small Tajik city of Pyandzh which is submerged in a sea of warm cotton fields.

"You know, he died right on the street," Zaynidin's father said to me, "without torments."

And then he suddenly asked the saddest question in the world which is heard so often in war: "But I can't understand: why him?" A question to which no one will ever give an answer.

Through the window can be seen the slender figure of the mother: her shoulders are convulsively bobbing up and down but tears are no longer pouring from her eyes. She became an old woman in one night. Kholdona Norova does not look at me—for I arrived "from there," from where death came to this home. I feel my boundless guilt before her, and to me my guilt does not seem strange. But nevertheless, I try not to look in her direction. I avoid these eyes as I avoid the eyes of Gulchekhra. Who is she now—an unmarried widow?

The helicopter carries me back—"there." Its shadow slips behind us in a trace along the rice paddies. The geese dash aside. We are the first to cross the border. We are already "here" and our shadow is still there. I glance at the helicopter pilot who is rushing me to the east. He is like a swimmer who has taken a deep breath before diving into the water. I remember each minute of the three hours without war....

"Time here is dimensionless, like synthetic Hong Kong sports shirts: You'll see for yourself," reported Lieutenant Colonel Vladykin who met me at the airfield. "Sometimes it is compressed, and the consciousness is not able to fix the beginning of one week when another comes along to replace it. And at times one day has such a volume, like..." he glanced about as if looking for a comparison, "like a life."

And if you consider that with the assistance of helicopters in a day you managed to visit several points separated from one another by hundreds of kilometers and to become close to dozens of new, absolutely previously unknown people who for some reason told you everything or almost everything and in such a way that their lives became part of your life and your experience and you began in good time together with them to like their friends, children, and even their wives and to hate everything that they hate--there, if you think of all this you will immediately agree with Vladykin:

"Correct, correct, Yuriy Ivanovich--'like synthetic Hong Kong sports shirts.' Yes, you have to write! And you, let us tie things together, are not spoiled between combat hops, eh?"

"I'm spoiled. Sometimes." He answered. "Here is how much paper was soiled."

He pushed toward me a thick notebook in a square for 48 kopeks which was covered with writing in a direct, precise, militarily clear handwriting. Glancing at it, I thought that he himself should be just as direct, precise, and clear a person as his handwriting.

"Read it sometimes when you recall Afghanistan or Moscow's tiresome questions overpower you."

"And isn't it a pity," I ask

"It's a pity to die, and this...." He waved a hand which was more accustomed to the helicopter control stick than to the pencil with which the sheets of the notebook were covered with writing.

Embracing, we parted. I looked after him. He ran to the side of the runway, on the way pulling on his worn ZSH [protective helmet]. He soon disappeared behind the door of the helicopter droopingly suspending the rotor blades toward the ground.....

In Afghanistan, a reporter cannot get around without a helicopter. They make you ubiquitous. Here you become accustomed to them as you become accustomed to a taxi in Moscow: you only lack the small blocks for their doors.

But even more than fly on helicopters, you must wait for a hop en route, vocalizing on hot airfields at the very runway or oscillating together with the hot air. After a series of refusals and fatiguing sitting beneath the blinding sun I usually had some half-real feeling that you simply ask that they take you to Arbat, and through the direct-vision window you hear the inexorable: "I'm in the park--don't you see?"

Helicopters are the modern cavalry of war, transferring you without fatigue from one end of Afghanistan to another. Helicopters landed on tiny pads between precipitous slopes, landing an assault force. Helicopters soared upward into the skies from the gloom of an abyss, collecting wounded. They almost flew into caves and pits from which machineguns struck. In lines and whole flights helicopters made their way along the bottom of canyons which are so narrow that no more than three meters remained along both sides from the tips of the blades to the cliffs. And then everything dried up within you because you knew--the rotor has only to touch the stones with its edges and it will be smashed to smithereens.

Helicopter pilots who have flown here if only a month demonstrated under the roar of the "dukhi" mortars and a mobile antiaircraft missile complex all the wonders of higher piloting skill, beginning with a maximum performance steep climbing turn, diving at an angle of 30 degrees, when you at once encompass the ground from horizon to horizon with your view, and ending with pitching, and this is already with elements of airplane piloting. They did things in the sky, straining parts from bursts, doing everything except the roll, which the helicopter was not made to do even theoretically, and the loop which was accomplished several times by the West Germans and the Americans. But this is circus--and I am writing about war.

When you fly in a helicopter it is impossible to talk--one can only yell. But you rapidly tire of this, and in order not to lose time in vain and to suck up at least some information you begin to read the stamped plant labels on the walls. Or what the assault troops scratched, and this, whatever you do, is the military literature of the soldiers. On one seat I read: "Don't suffer, anything can happen. Let the one who forgot you suffer. Don't long for the past. Just believe in yourself." And on another--"Don't fuss!" It sounded like an order.

Some day Afghanistan will give its Bondarev, Bykov, or Baklanov. But for the present, they are testing their pens on the seats of helicopters. Novels are in the future.

The helicopters flew several meters above the head, pressing you with the ecumenical roar of their engines to the bottom of the SPS's¹⁰ and immediately afterward on the faces of the soldiers their ghostly shadows rushed past. They appeared from the darkness which stretched out to the rear and departed directly into the orange dawns and purple sunsets, leaving only a tremor in the cliffs and an itch in the chest which was closely pressed to the ground.

Last year, I remember, the helicopters flew at maximum altitude, but now, with the appearance of the Stingers, they descended from 6,000 (the approximate ceiling for the Mi-8) and fly five meters from the ground at a speed of 250 kilometers per hour, hiding in the folds of the terrain and between the coniform hills, flying around the villages at three kilometers (the maximum machinegun range for aimed fire) and frightening into a panic the flocks of sheep which are scattering.

Flying at the lowest possible altitudes is dangerous in some ways and not in others: the landing gear suddenly grazes a high-voltage line or a branch of a tree, and then the "helicopter complex" supplements the entire set of complexes which you drag along from childhood.

...The heat became hellish. Vladyskin flew off long ago, and I just sat at the airfield waiting for the UAZ from the subunit of assault troops. In my breast pocket lay a notebook which was twisted into a tube--the diary of helicopter pilot Yu. I. Vladyskin. I decided to leaf through it. This also was literature about the war, more accurately literature written by the war itself. I opened the first page:

"25 October: After four hours of flight in an armored flight helmet the head also becomes armored.

"4 November. All the basic concepts of combat work firmly entered each of us and no longer cause white splashes of emotion. A tired person reacts poorly to everything except letters from home. November divides two times of the year in our work. It has also become a milestone. On 1 November on a high pad in the mountains the commander of an Mi-8, Senior Lieutenant Sergey Shinnikov, died. Later the commander landed me there, and for the first time I saw how terribly burned skulls grin. Two soldiers and Serega were unable to jump from the burning machine. To the side--the front wheel, the unit with free-flight rockets, and a puddle of melted metal. I wanted to pull out immediately, but when we approached a grenade exploded about five meters away. I flew with the charred bodies. For two or three days the coveralls smelled of roasted meat.

"7 November. On television is preparation for the demonstration on Red Square. But I no longer have time to look: On Chernaya Mountain Valera Savchenko is covering his wingman under heavy fire, Tutov was shot down by a missile.

¹⁰ SPS--fixed firing point.

He is an imperturbable and calm fellow. The crew jumped in parachutes from an altitude of 150-200 meters. Kiselevich and Tutov--normally, but Golovkov did not have enough altitude, only about 10 meters. They landed directly in a "dukhi" nest. Tutov saw a "dukhi" within five meters. Tutov succeeded in being the first to shoot. They got together under fire. He thought they will strike. They were bypassed.

"15 November. An assault on Chernaya Mountain--where Tutov fell. It was quiet for 30 minutes and then even the stones began to shoot: so many firing points. Below--the 'bees,' above--we. Great courage--without tension-- is needed by those who are on the 'bees': difficult areas, lots of assault troops. Each cliff is firing. Those for the second time say: no sweeter than the Pandzhshir. I am rotating above the site for the second hour already, the BK¹¹ is hardly left. We economize and fire only at the 'svarka'¹². We suppressed the 'prisluga'¹³ several times, but each time a new one came running. Vitya Buyashkin passes over a peak where a large-caliber machinegun was just neutralized. In my sight he was hit by several point-blank bursts. The entire right side was pierced and a 'cigar'¹⁴ was smashed. His wingman Nikulin smoke-screened him and without communication he made a forced landing. Nikulin was covered by Matveyev, and Gergel and I remained above the area. Nikulin landed normally. I shouted to him: 'Drop the blocks!' (to lighten the load). He did not hear. All are alive but two have fractures. Fedorych, most likely, will not fly. Pilots flew without legs but did not fly without hands. And in the evening this same Vitya Buyashkin took off but did not return to the airfield. They picked him up at night....

"12 April. March has gone. I was home from the fourth through the eighteenth. It is impossible to transmit in words what this is--a meeting after a long parting. And here I am in Afghanistan again. For ages the wind here levelled many peaks of old mountains but, on the contrary, sharpened the peaks of the highest more sharply. It cut canyons and made through holes in slopes. It is very apparent that this very wind, raising sand and salty dust, strips from people the entire outer husk and efflorescence, leaving us in protoplasmic form. Strong and weak--these concepts are not debatable but nevertheless there is some minimum of necessary qualities which, not having been attained, a person cannot count on the confidence of his comrades on this earth. There are people who are reliable even from the first flight, like high-quality cartridges. And there are those like clouds above the mountains--pure, bright, and soaring high above the earth. And all the same, with the large and the significant this is not building material. And there are also those in the 'middle.' At first glance they are not very noticeable. They are among the last to be presented for awards. But perhaps they are the most reliable people. Such boys can be compared with the good earth on which grain and flowers are raised. Looking at roses, we are seldom carried away by the earth which raised the beauty. The majority of our people are like this.

"Today is Cosmonaut Day. A beautiful, needed, and celebrated case--cosmonautics, but nevertheless it would be possible to institute Internationalist Day...."

¹¹ BK--unit of fire.

¹² "Svarka"--a large-caliber machinegun.

¹³ "Prisluga"--machinegun crew.

¹⁴ "Cigar"--free-flight rocket.

The UAZ suddenly leaped directly onto the runway and in a minute we already drove to the west. On the left and right flashed the red spots of poppies, harmless in appearance but fraught with the narcotic apparition which, after long ordeals in white will finally acquire flesh in the form of a faded powder in order to be transformed into a day dream or the hallucination of a drug addict somewhere on 12th Street Manhattan. You do not want to, but you believe that the flowers have a soul. The "resettlement" of the poppy "souls" from Afghanistan to other countries is being undertaken by the counterrevolution for which narcotics are one of the big financial sources which permit purchasing modern weapons. So that the resident of 12th Street in New York is only a temporary haven for the apparition of this charming flower on the long path of its endless transformations from narcotics into the Stinger or Red Eye. And so--the flower does not even enter your head as a flower which can shoot down that Mi-8 which is hovering above the city.

Running among the poppy fields are children who are stark naked. But here one of them ran his hand over his body and on the palm already is a small handful of pollen. The very same.... The "bachats" roll it into dark sticky balls and offer them for a couple of hundred Afghani: "Commodore, Keyf!" they shout in clear Russian.

A camel is standing on the shoulder. He is abusively haughty: he looks at you from top to bottom. True, he has the eyes of a wise man, and everything is forgiven wise men. Or almost everything.

Just what is the connection between the camel and the poppy fields? It is direct. Two or three kilometers from the border the merchant places about a dozen cellophane packets with white powder on the camel's tongue and the latter swallows them without suffering. And after about 40 minutes, when the border is left behind, the animal regurgitates them and the packets again find themselves in the pouch of the peaceful wanderer. This is what you should think about when looking at the moist purple eyes of this wise man with the hump in which earth and sky changed places.

...Striving furiously upward the magnificent crown of the Jalalabad trees resemble congealed bursts--red, white, and green.

Here the narinzh has already flowered and for this reason the city is buried in its heady aroma. We leap a little more rapidly through a eucalyptus grove which our people long ago nicknamed "nightingale." In the evenings bullets with a lethal purpose sing charmingly--you listen. They really are directly drowned out by the semiforeign warbles. Music, so to say, from beyond the borders.

The winter residence of the former king of Afghanistan--it is all in lilac color. There is an abundance of marble in the palace itself. Walls, columns, floors. Even the numerous bathrooms are finished in this stone. The toilet bowl looks like a pedestal for a still not carved sculpture of some energetic, dramatic modelling. Marble always reminds me of a museum. Museums are cemeteries, especially Catholic. No one is living in the residence now. Moreover, the blowing up of the post office building of Jalalabad which was accomplished recently by the "dukhi" visited the windows in the palace. It has gotten even darker from this and recalls a tomb. However, Ghulam Said who has been acting as mayor in the city for two years already has begun to repair the former residence.

Incidents of sabotage in the city against those who sympathize with people's power take place one after the other. Recently dushman beat to death with stones the chairman of the province's Commission on National Reconciliation Nangarhan Mirza Inayatollah, and his sick son.

A hotel which our soldiers just restored from the ruins was intended for refugees coming from Pakistan. The Afghans had never in their born days seen such comfort. However, the dushman spread the rumor that this is a prison. Rumors are also weapons which the counterrevolution uses skillfully.

Near the hotel stood a woman in yashmak with a child in her arms. The child died along the road from Pakistan several days previously, but, as formerly, she did not give the child to anyone. His little body had become stiff and blue. And this was the most terrible thing that I saw in Afghanistan.

Success of ambush operations as, perhaps, none others, depends in such a significant measure on the will of the event and, meanwhile, expectations so often deceive us that from the beginning I decided to attune myself to failure: one more hopeless method of outfoxing fate. But what is success? To surprise the "dukhi" and enter into night combat with them when you do not determine at once who is shooting at whom and, moreover, who will emerge the victor? Or for the entire ambush to chatter its jaws from the cold (and, perhaps, only once the breech mechanism) but emerge without a single scratch, as if they had killed a scorpion? For people in war, of course, it is the former. For the majority of people. The second variant only irritates with its senselessness.

The early morning promised a day of incinerating heat and each of those who were to go out on ambush in the evening imbibed the dawn cool which was already dissolving in the rays of the red sun greedily, with every cell of his body. We formed up on the parade ground over which the wind drove dust and empty green tins from the dry-ration juice, stiffening with the cold like a pack of hounds. We were to run with full combat pack for six kilometers around the battalion disposition area.

...The sweat begins to pour already on the second hundred meters--the body's vengeance for an irregular Moscow life. For fear of mines and possibly being fired on from the "green zone," the road was covered by several infantry combat vehicles on a kilometer section which had been previously checked by the combat engineers.

The knapsack which is cram-full beats in a frenzy against the lathery back and the flask quivers against the side. The Kalashnikov tries to knock out a tooth with its muzzle.

Finally, 50 paratroopers including one reporter cover 6,000 meters in 32 minutes and some seconds.

Preparation for going out on ambush begins immediately after breakfast: outfitting, receiving ammunition and communication equipment, cleaning weapons. Tonight each of us will carry up to 60 kilograms: cartridges for the assault rifle, bullet-proof vest (and simply an armored burster layer), sleeping bag, cotton peacoat, a unit of fire for the grenade launcher, an additional

machinegun ammunition belt, dryration, assault rifle, two flasks with water, chest harness with six magazines, illumination and signal flares, pyrotechnical flare.... You can't count it all but it has to be stowed.

Something happened to the weather: rain and wind outside the window of the storeroom alternate as rapidly as the mood of a neurasthenic alone changes.

I cram a bandage packet into the iron butt of the assault rifle and wind a rubber band around it. I shove an ampoule with promedole and three batteries for the night vision binoculars into a knapsack.

During the time spent in Afghanistan my equipment became unimaginably mixed and is now an international mixture. On a captured "dukhi" knapsack is the stamp "U.S. Army." The sleeping bag of eider down is British. The instructions within say that the "sleeping bag is intended for British soldiers who are fighting under Arctic conditions." It was sewn in 1949. Some soldier dragged it on his backbone 37 years ago and where are his bones rotting now? The thermos was not lucky--it is without kith or kin, in general there is no stamp on it. But for me personally, it will always remain South Baghlan. For a long time I picked out of the cavity around it shells of black plastic explosive and here, now, the thermos in good working order holds any liquid but, true, not temperature. It is nothing, it will also pass as a flask. Well, and the khaki-colored jacket of thick artificial fur--a matter of the hands of Pakistan. And that it why it is called a "Pakistanka." Taken on the trip is what is most convenient and light. However, in addition, of course, to the forthcoming ambush we are all united by the Kimryatskaya shoe factory. All fifty paratroopers are in its cross-laced boots which the soldiers simply call "kimry." They will give odds to any strongest "Adidas" which inevitably fall apart after the first 100 kilometers over the stony desert or mountain trail. I do not know what our Soviet light industry personnel who are concerned about clothing the Soviet soldiers think in this regard, but I do know what is thought of their products by the soldiers themselves who are forced to purchase with their personal money (24 rubles and kopeks) the "kimry" in the post exchange. So that the paratroopers fight in the classical blue berets and boots cleaned to a shine only in the movies.

It is quiet and dark in the storeroom. Outside the window the wind and the rain are fighting as formerly. The sun is skillfully masked behind the clouds. In walks Vladik Dzhabbarov, singing almost to himself the very same phrase: "You may not shine with your mind, but you are required to shine with your boot... tam-param-tam, tam-param-tam...."

"Do I sing correctly?" he turns to SanaSklyar who is dozing on top of a double-decker bunk. "And you, Brutus, sleep...."

Dzhabbarov takes cartridges out of a box and begins to push them into the clips. A rather small person with a red beard walks past the window.

"Don't worry," Vladik calms me, "it is the electrician. They are civilians."

By the way, in local soldier's jargon Sklyar and Dzhabbarov are also "civilians," but in a different sense--they will be replaced in a couple of weeks.

Sklyar is sleeping soundly, but from time to time in his sleep he begins to prove something furiously. He is doing this so convincingly that the one with whom he is now quarrelling in his sleep wants to say: "Don't be nasty, Sklyar knows what he is saying."

All 50 lads who are to make a 20-kilometer march at night over steppe and to participate in the ambush are resting. Therefore, you try to use this hour and a half allotted to the commander for sleep to the maximum for journalistic purposes: at night you don't speak.

The soldier tells about himself in different ways. One long and thoroughly, and you only succeed in turning the sheets in the notebook. Another sets forth everything which he has experienced in sparing Army language, almost according to the regulations. A third limits himself to a short witty remark or to a gesture, but so capacious that it is worth an hour-and-a-half of exhausting talk. And others relate so clearly that you automatically become one of the persons acting in the narration.

I was met by soldiers who were able to transmit all shadings of their sensations impressionistically. But there also were those who lay out bare information for you, noting: "The emotions you can add yourself."

For the entire allotted hour and a half I spoke with Dzhabbarov and Sklyar who had overslept about the too serious fate which was taken from the powerful "Sharp" which stood on a shelf among the lads' personal things. It always seemed to me that fate and war, fate and patriotism, fate and international duty--these are concepts from completely different universes. But in this small storeroom, just as in dozens of others scattered about the Afghan land, they somehow get along together in a striking manner.

A month will pass: "civilians" Dzhabbarov and Sklyar will be "demobilized." And then, for very long years the most intimate music for them will become that which they rarely hear here. I have in mind the songs "Cascade" and "Blue Berets" about Afghanistan, about the motherland, about combat brotherhood, about love, and about war.

In war, about war sounds poorly.

"Fate and war? I see nothing incompatible in this," the very young Lieutenant Kolya Zubkov grins. "One must simply disconnect himself from firing and explosions, and fate can stifle everything. But there are things which I will never understand and will not be able to accept. Last year, during a leave I was in Leningrad with my wife. For the first time. We are walking and blinking to the sides. A miniature fellow appears from behind a corner---top, top, top.... In general, such a, you know, loose trot slaps along the Nevskiy. A white shirt with the collar buttoned. A thin black tie which, to me, is called a herring."

Kolya stands, rocking to and fro on his long legs. He himself is about two meters tall. Closely cropped black hair already touched with light gray. Almost aristocratic features almost impressed in the temples of a dark-complexioned face, a small, precise moustache. A classical officer of the classical Russian army. Scratching the back of his head, he continues:

"We crossed each other, and my wife said, elbowing me in the side: 'Kolya, look--he has a swastika on his tie.' She herself grew pale and did not know what to do next. I did not believe it: in Peter a swastika? I did a 180 turn and turned back, behind the lad. My wife hung on my arm--she did not let it go. 'Wait,' I say to her, and I'll wind the tie around his little finger. I look, and there really is a swastika. 'What are you doing, you bitch of a cat?' I asked him. I was surprised that passersby, including elderly, began to intercede for the lad. I then turned to them: 'What are you? Or can you no longer remember anything--did you forget how they starved you for 900 days? Eh?' But here an entire pack of people surrounded my wife and me and began: 'The Afghans are killing ours! The Afghans are killing ours! The assault force landed!' I am in the uniform of the airborne troops with orders--the Banner and Star--and it is awkward to create an incident on the street. My wife and I walked on farther, but I was terribly upset."

We take several steps in silence. Then he says:

"I thought about all this for a long time. The problem of the Peters lad is that he has no problems. So he thinks up toys for himself. But toys are like booby traps which the 'dukhi' set out here: you don't know when and where they will explode. These lads look on normal life as on penal servitude. But, you see, penal servitude is only where the blows of the pick are deprived of meaning. If you would let such as them in the ambush tonight, in an instant all the scale would be stripped off."

We again return to the storeroom. "Sharp" now was overstrained by the booming voice of Rod Stewart.

"Some people spend all their lives," Zubkov sits on a cot, almost pushing out Sklyar, "searching for its meaning. Others from youth waved their hand at this lost hope and decided to accept it as it is. But here I came to one very curious conclusion: one must introduce meaning to life. That is all."

"Here some remnants of tattered things remain after your very first combat actions from your former aims and ideas," Sklyar wipes his washed face which has turned pink dry. "To unite them again into something whole is already unrealistic, just as it is impossible to assemble the head, leg, and torso which have been torn apart by a shell. When I said goodbye to Elka at the station in the Soviet Union, I immediately understood that I am saying goodbye not only to her, but to myself. To that myself which I can never be again." He neatly places in a night table his soap and toothbrush. "Strange send-offs happened: we all sent ME off. The transformation from a "young man" to a "cherpak"¹⁵ and then into a 'civilian' is very precise; by the way, it transmits basic stages of change in a soldier's psyche. It is like several times you change your armor or skin. But it seems to me personally that even the chemical composition of my cells became different. This is for sure: I'll arrive home, I'll make an analysis of my blood, and it will not be the same as it was two years ago."

Today's ambush is the last in the lives of Sklyar and Dzhabbarov. Each of them has dozens of combat outings behind them: raids on caravans with weapons,

¹⁵ "Cherpak"--a soldier who has served in Afghanistan for half a year.

landing from helicopters and armored personnel carriers, ambushes.... The commander does not let the "civilian" go out on the operation: if you have served here for two years, the last 20-30 days they spare you and take care of you. For the risk is like radiation. At some moment its dose will become critical. But in which units is the level of risk measured? And really, the instrument for this has not yet been invented.

And forthcoming here is an ambush which separates them from all other life. It is like the last 10 centimeters which you must cover along the ledge of a skyscraper: you know that in comparison with what was left behind it is real misery. But misery on which everything depends.

By the way, it looks like it is only I who worries about them. They themselves are calm, like those mountains there which can be seen from the window of the storeroom. They silently continue to pack their knapsacks. And the lads' are sumptuous, light, and roomy. With an abundance of small pockets for any thunderbolts there.

This is also the last combat outing for Slava Sorokin. He has 15 days to demobilization. Even less than Dzhabbarov and Sklyar--not 10 centimeters, but 5. And here he sits, grasping a guitar by the waist, and he hums something to himself through the nose.

"At first," Sorokin interrupts his song, "it was difficult because I knew and understood nothing. You understand everything.... Here I look at all these mountains which are around. And deserts. Much strength was left there: you feel yourself not so much grown up as grown old. At the very end of the last ambush everything was played out, was drenched, and frozen--I fired only so that all this would end sooner. But it is bitter to leave: both Afghanistan and life here, and it is not the low sky in our manner,--everything became ours. Everything is already flowing here...." And Sorokin runs a finger along a vein of the left arm.

He again slowly and delicately runs his fingers over the cold strings as, probably, he once touched the hair of the one whose picture he just showed me. Here the guitar is the only thing that a soldier can embrace for two very long years.

"...So that you, cuckoo, wait a little," Slava sings quietly, almost in a whisper, "I have to give another's share to someone...."

The evening smoothes all the colors of the distant mountains into one--dim gray. The ground shakes slightly yielding like a buzz in the feet: a long column of APC's from the adjacent unit stretches along the road, returning from combat operations. The dust which it raises later slowly settles on the faces of the soldiers and the leaves of the trees. Beneath the roar of the engines, like the roar of a crowd which has lost its senses, Rod Stewart nevertheless sounds hoarsely in the ears. For a long time we look from under the panama hats at the vehicles which are shrouded in grayish-red clouds of exhaust fumes, sand, and dust. At how they pass by slowly, keeping a clear interval of about 15 meters between them. They are travelling one behind the other and one can see how the big-eared heads of the drivers protrude from their front hatches. Their faces, reflecting the light of the instrument panels, are phosphorescent in the darkness.

You cannot see the faces of those on the APC. Simply bent black silhouettes and the thin antenna rods reaching for the sky. The antennas rock in different directions and beat against the crowns of the trees, skinning them. The column passes, the clank and rumble grow silent beyond the mountain, and the lifeless extended leaves of the eucalyptus are left to lay in the road.

"A small child in the place? Let the child touch it!" Kolya Zherelin, a 25-year-old lieutenant with a face which is brown from the dust and sunburn shouts in one of the throat microphones of the interphone headset.

The child, the back of whose head with a short haircut can be seen in the hatch, presses on the pedal and our infantry fighting vehicle moves out onto the road. All 50 paratroopers, having settled in the vehicles, are moving to the southeast on the road to Peshawar. Only 30 kilometers remain to the border with Pakistan. But already after 15 we dismount and, under the cover of night, we take off sharply for a kilometer from the road, along the Durand Line, so that covering 20 kilometers, they could lay in ambush close to the villages of (Singir) and (Biru). According to available information, tonight a band will pass by there which tomorrow should dig in in the area of Jamali, and fire on our helicopter personnel at dawn.

With us in the detachment is an Afghan scout, a wiry person of about 40 years with a stiff gray beard and shining bulging eyes. He himself is a native of the village of (Biru): he knows all the local trails and the caravan routes like the five fingers on his hand.

Conversing by radio with Captain Kozlov, Zherelin pats the gun of the infantry fighting vehicle as a loyal dog. It is pitch dark. Only two red fire zone markers in front of the howling infantry fighting vehicle loom about 15 meters from us. A cold dry wind from the mountains numbs the face which is poured over in the gaps between it by gusts of burning-hot exhausts of the vehicles. Only another couple of stars flash weakly in the sky. But one need only glance in the night-vision binoculars and you see that all of it is shining with a multimillion stellar eruption.

An Afghan truck is rushing toward us. It suddenly makes the rounds of the column with the yellow light of the headlights. Zherelin swears: "We clatter over half of Afghanistan, and here they decided to give us away: look 'dukhi,' a Soviet assault force is going into ambush."

In about five minutes all the infantry fighting vehicles turn off the road to the north and for 300-400 meters and we jolt over the rocks. Then on the march we dismount and, extending into a long extended line, we turn in the opposite direction and go south along a dry river channel. The APC's continue to roar behind us, simulating our movement out to the north.

Bent in three, each of us runs across the same road with a rapid jerk along which we rolled with such comfort quite recently in the APC's.

The moon clears away the clouds, and now each pebble of the steppe shines in its light, neatly covered with foil and striving to bite into the foot of the "kimr." After about three kilometers, the stones become smaller and smaller with each step

and here we already rave, sinking up to the ankles in the still warm sand. It covers the ground from horizon to horizon: the steppe resembles its gigantic solar burn.

Sweat pours from beneath the helmet which they gave me for protection and covers the eyes with a stinging cellophane film. Everyone sits, settling back on the knapsacks and thrusting the feet forward. The medical instructor, San Sanych, sits himself in the Turkish manner, removes his panama hat, and his shaven skull becomes silvery from sweat.

"And tonight, brothers, there will be lots of moonlight," he says, strongly tossing back his head and slightly opening his mouth as if for gargling, "and we are with you as if spread before your eyes."

It is for this very reason that the point of the advance guard continues the route while the detachment rests.

Nevertheless, the steppe gives off the heat which was accumulated during the day, and you feel that if you are not in a bath, you are in the dressing room of a bath house--exactly. No one touches the flasks although you want to drink like a vulture. At least to wet the dry mouth with sand crusting on the teeth. But even this cannot be done: no one knows how things will go and how long it will be necessary to stay in the ambush. The value of the water grows with each passing minute. And in half an hour you will look at the flask as your dearest thing. Everything loses meaning except moisture. If you landed in a puddle now, you would drink up. By the way, this can actually be done: every paratrooper has in his knapsack a tube with porous coal and an abundance of various filters.

It is time to get up. You tear yourself away from the ground just as if you were glued to it.

We are going again. Like monks. A person's ability for mimicry never crossed the mind of a chameleon. Here you are turned into a grain of sand, in the mountains you will be a stone.

The moon measures the sky by steps. It goes with us, illuminating the looping path between the coniform hills and the villages. The moon is over you and immediately behind you instead of shadow there trails fatigue, sometimes overtaking, sometimes lagging behind. It, thirst, and sand become the goal, called by a short but exhausting word--steppe. At first glance it is lifeless and silent but in fact is filled with the presence of man. True, latent, hardly perceptible. We are reminded of this by the blowing wind with the rotten acid odors of the village which is concealed nearby. Or the muffled bark of a dog. Or the wail and pair of shining eyes of a jackal rummaging in search of food close to some small hamlet.

Thoughts intermixing with snatches of recollections break up into tiny fragments in the head which is constantly being shaken from walking, just like in a money box. The brain, inflamed from thirst and heat and jumping from one thing to another, cannot concentrate on something specific. In the mouth is a rusty metallic taste like after a fast run for a long distance.

Ahead, in the mountains, you notice red and yellow lights moving toward one another. At first you think----for the present you are still capable of this-- that a highway was laid out somewhere there and vehicles are rushing along it. Then you understand: absurd, it cannot be. In fact, everything is simple. Two "dukhi" bands are waging a fierce night battle, but so far away that the shots cannot be heard. You note the flashes of light. Summer lightning? No, grenade launchers. Thousands of tracers leave behind themselves elongated, threadlike traces: like slanting long sprays of a bloody rain.

Dzhabbarov is tramping ahead of me. He is breaking a piece of hardtack and is passing several pieces back along the skirmish line. Here one reaches me and immediately lands in the mouth, sticking in the dry throat.

The assault force crunches hardtack on the entire desert: the night is dry and ringing--any sound flies out for kilometers around. For camouflage and concealment I begin not to chew, but to press the hardtack with the teeth.

Dzhabbarov lugs his knapsack lightly and in a free and easy manner, just like on a tourist trip. Weekly multikilometer marches trained his will and legs. In addition, he is a candidate for master of sport in bicycle sport. Prior to the army, he raced on his duraluminum "Start-shosse" in Sverdlovsk. Up to now he corresponds with his coach with short postcards. "Look, Vladek," the latter wrote in the last one, "press on the pedals: just a little more. In return after Afghanistan any difficulty will seem like a mosquito bite."

Gradually I get my second breath and my thoughts are formed up in a more or less harmonious chain. Of course, not how we tramp across the steppe, but nevertheless....

Sklyar's rhythmic breathing is heard from behind: inhale--exhale, inhale--exhale. "At home I had the reputation of a terrible hooligan," he admitted to me back in the storeroom, "I did not sally forth from the pedagogical councils and from the teachers' room." I listened to him and believed. I already knew: former hooligans usually leave Afghanistan with the Order of the Red Star on the chest. In some improbable manner their recklessness is remelted into heroism here.

...Again a silent village. We bypass all the settlements encountered on our route in such a way that the wind blows from their direction in ours and not vice versa. Otherwise the dogs, smelling "heterodoxes," will begin to bark. We are moving and orienting exclusively by compass. True, we also have 1:50,000 maps, but they are needed here no more than cutting pliers in a bath: the steppe is devoid of reference points just as of water. In return, an abundance of camel thorns. It remains to wish that you are not a camel.

Thoughts again begin to dance. Primarily around something liquid-like. To endure thirst further is equivalent to suicide. I reach a flask from behind my bosom and take a sip. It seems that the water now begins to hiss on the scorching teeth. It actually evaporates somewhere, not even succeeding in reaching the belly. Or did it take in dust and sand which obstructed my mouth and nostrils? Only the second sip reaches the designated place. I drink from the flask, strongly throwing my head back, and I see in the sky directly overhead Berenices Hair

and just a little farther seven of her stars. Here is Mizar, and next to it barely glimmers Alcor. It is the Big Dipper. A dipper with which one can draw water. Much water. If you want to drink, which you don't show to yourself, your brain nevertheless will be linked with water. I now realized for myself that in addition to all types and subtypes of freedoms which man has thought up there is one more--freedom to drink water.

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The bands in the mountains with crunching names are fighting as formerly. But we travelled about 17 kilometers, and if you consider that it was necessary to loop all the time, then it was a total of 20-23. Therefore, although muffled the firing and bursts were already heard. The moon is now so bright that one can see the shadows from the clouds creep over the desert. The butterflies circle in a disorderly manner, endeavoring to fly up to it.

A short rest. All 50 instantaneously sit down. In the language of the medical instructor San Sanych, this is called "taking a loon's bath." Five or six men withdraw to the side because of their needs and stand like carved images. After three minutes we are again on our feet and we are moving again. The soldier walked in exactly the same way 3,000 years ago. With the only difference that instead of an assault rifle he had in his hands a sword or spear. It seems as though so much time passes but, as formerly, the basic transport of the soldier remains his two feet: once upon a time in sandals, then in boots, and now in cross-laced boots. What will replace them?

Coniform hills appeared. There is their horseshoe-like chain. We climb it, occupying all the dominant peaks. Here the principle is as follows: who climbed higher is the one who won. We immediately begin to build embrasures. There are almost no stones, therefore, it is necessary to run below, to the "green zone": There, in the channel of a dry stream, is a whole accumulation of them. At each embrasure or, in military talk, fixed firing point (SPS) 20-25 massive cobblestone boulders are used. The adjacent coniform hill on the 1:50,000 map is marked with the number 642. The left flank of the cover is located there. Its right flank is on hill 685. We are in the middle. Captain Kozlov with his group combs the "green zone" below. It is presumed that the movement of the bands will be namely along the dried-out channel of the Khovr river which separates the coniform hills from the vegetation. In the night vision binoculars one can discern several "dukhi" embrasures for firing but it is better not to approach them: they usually are mined.

Dzhabbarov and I cover the bottom of our SPS with shelter halves: by 0100 hours the ground was already cold and really it is becoming colder and colder in general: it is desirable not to catch cold in the kidneys or urinary bladder. We lay down and set the assault rifles in the embrasure. The knapsack can now be dropped from the back. It is one quarter soaked with sweat and became even heavier. Zherelin and the radio operator settled down in the adjacent SPS. He is maintaining communications with Kozlov.

"'Disput,' 'Disput,' I am 'Komet,' how do you hear me, over...." Zherelin speaks in a quiet but clear voice.

The wind blew from the mountains, and by now it is really cold. The soaked jacket hardens and it is necessary to pull on a "pakistanka" on top of it. By the way, it doesn't help much. The steel helmet which they put on me for safety back in the battalion now shakes just like the helmet of a miner who is working with a jackhammer. I remove it so that this saucepan does not give the ambush away with its splitting clanging. The armored burster layer saves me: during the movement over the steppe its titanium plates heated up and now you feel in it as in a thermos which is cooling down.

The throat begins to tickle from the sudden temperature drop. Now, in addition to the freedom to drink they took away one more from me--the freedom to cough. It is forbidden more than the former. Some continuous dictatorship.

It is also forbidden to speak: we communicate by gestures and whispers. It is senseless even to dream of smoking: even if you cover the light with the palms a "dukhi" will see its weak glow through your hands in a night vision instrument all the same. By the way, the dushman sometimes even get around without binoculars. We have seven of them in the group. One is chattering on my neck. It will give the capability if not for clear listening, then at least for clear vision accurately. And although the batteries have not yet succeeded in running down, this capability should be used economically. And nevertheless, I glance at them every minute: that is Zherelin's order. It is necessary to observe the channel below. The binoculars color everything all around light green: a green moon, Sklyar's green face, the green village in the distance. The lenses provide powerful magnification and two human figures can be seen in one of its bystreets. I tell Dzhabbarov about this.

"There is an ammunition dump of the band which is now being sent toward us. The 'dukhi' are spending the night in the village, during the day will be transformed into local peasants, and tomorrow night they will march out on sabotage. During the day these villages are ours, and at night 'theirs.' That is the whole thing. There they already know...." Vladik waved in the direction where the green figures were seen who did not suspect that at a distance of four kilometers two pairs of eyes--Dzhabbarov's and mine--are observing them fixedly through a layer of impenetrable darkness.

"What do they know?" I asked in a whisper.

"They know that a band is moving and they are waiting for it," Vladik spoke hoarsely.

...Then suddenly all sounds abated--they disappeared altogether. It was as if someone turned the reading of the volume control to the zero reading. This happens when the violinist already removed the bow from the strings and in the hall for one more instant a sound soars, fading away. Some ringing note, fading no longer outside, but within you,--a weak echo of a day which rumbled and clanged with tracks.

It seemed as though for the time the war forgot about our detachment.

But I lay and understood with my skin that the silence was just as deceptive as my presentiments. I knew that moving toward us is a band which is still unheard

for the present and which an hour ago emerged from a bloody battle in the mountains. That other rebel detachments, large and small, lurked in such ambushes as this one. And some mine the approaches to fortified areas or mountain trails. And the entire detachment felt as if it was in a devil's merry-go-round when you think that you are hunting who is in front of you and he presumes that he is hunting you. But such silence did not provide calm and did not grant rest but wore out those more capable of another battle.

I completely turned off the sound and felt that I am falling someplace. In my head still sounded the indistinct echoes of the day, but suddenly they became a dream, short, but cram full of people and armored personnel carriers. There were almost no conversations in the dream. Only actions. By the way, just as in a minor war. I dreamed that I am flying in a two-seater and here I have to bail out but at that second when the canopy is tilted backward I suddenly recall with horror that there is no parachute. (At this instant cold sweat appears on the brow of the sleeper....) Or that my armored personnel carrier flamed out and a "dukhi" is thrashing it from an antitank rocket launcher by direct fire from the "green zone." Awakening, I will subconsciously try to ride on a BTR-70: it has two engines, and if the first one flames out the second will pull you out. So that the dreams determine not only consciousness, but also a way of living.

Through the fleeting drowsiness I hear a familiar tune. It is Sklyar's electronic watch which is cheeping from the adjacent embrasure. He acquired it in a stall: instead of a trivial scraping each hour it plays a short tune from the movie "Man and Woman." It is pleasant and unbelievably strange to hear it here, in a night ambush. I close my eyes, and through my drowsiness I recall how I saw this picture in a small Lovozerskiy movie theater at (saami) on the Kola Peninsula. Around lay the silent tundra, a herd of reindeer wandered over it, and thin jets of blue smoke stretched into the sky from the lone, pointed tents. They say that now, 20 years later, the French made a second series of the film with the same actors. What is this--an attempt to return to their youth? Or nostalgia for the world of the sixties? And in general, where am I? In the Kola tundra? Or am I whirling along with (Trentinyan) along the Paris-Dakar route? Or do I turn to ice in the (Tarrak) steppe 15 kilometers from the Afghan-Pakistan border?

...Sklyar nevertheless succeeds in making the watch fall silent. Just like the one I saw on the arm of Peter Arnett. An interesting coincidence. The second coincidence is that not long before me Peter traversed this very river channel which I am attentively observing through binoculars after a short five-minute sleep. But naturally, not with a detachment of Afghan or Soviet paratroopers but with a band of dushman. They crossed the steppe which extends behind me and reached Jalalabad. Then they again returned to Pakistan. I recall how I met with Peter in his Moscow corporation point and asked him to tell me in detail about his illegal wandering through Afghanistan. The story which he told is well imprinted in my memory.

Arnett is already more than 50. And I, following him in the office heaped with newspapers, was still amazed how he managed such a long foot trip over the Afghan mountains and steppes.

I placed the binoculars on the shelter half and, loosening the lacing of the "kimr" on the worn-out legs I thought that for me, although I am less than half as old as Arnett, a night march over the steppe would by no means be as easy as presumed earlier. Evidently, I recalled, he was greatly helped by the tempering acquired during the years of journalistic work in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Salvador.

"Of the countries of Central America were you only in Salvador?" I asked when we sat at the journalist table.

"And in Nicaragua, too." He took a swallow of soda water.

"When?" I asked.

"In the winter of 1985."

"Strange that we missed each other: I was there at that time."

I again looked at the river channel and imagined how the water makes noise in it when there are abundant rains or the snow melts in the mountains. Now the river was dead and twisted silently between the coniform hills. "Nicaragua," I thought, "it is the third coincidence."

"Were you there with the 'contras' or with the Sandanistas?"

"With both," he answered.

I told Arnett about the celebrated case of John (Lantigua), correspondent of the WASHINGTON POST, who became the crown frieze of reporters of the foreign press corps in Managua. John (Lantigua) travelled with a group of accredited journalists on an APC toward the border with Honduras. There they were fired upon by the 'contras.' The frightened (Lantigua) began to yell that there was water through the firing slit for the entire Sierra: "For God's sake, cease fire: we are friendly here!" By which he gave himself away. More accurately, his ideological positions.

"The positions of American journalism," Arnett noted, "permit us to look on different sides of the barricade. These positions ensure us freedom of thought."

"Listen, Peter, we have little time together, and the route from Pakistan to Afghanistan and back which you covered was long, so let us change from the 'contras' to the dushman. How did they greet you? Didn't the noxious spirit of the West in your face smear the first-formed innocence of the Moslem East? I'll bet you taught them to drink whiskey, eh?"

Arnett laughed and began his story:

"There were two of us: Ed Healey, a photographer from Dallas, and me, representing the journal PARADE. We went with a group of rebels along a path illuminated by the moon. The wind blew the skirts of their long cotton robes. I also wore a robe and, accordingly, a turban, so that my appearance of a foreigner from the West, as you said, was not striking. However, in the unaccustomed clothing it was all the more difficult to walk. We secretly crossed the border with Afghanistan in a place which I will not tell you and continued to move along rocky

paths which led into the clouds. At times, it was necessary to clamber over precipitous cliffs."

I glanced at him: "It is interesting how you succeeded in this."

In English there is no difference between "thee" and "you." However, each of us felt that we had gone over to the familiar. Perhaps Afghanistan brought us closer together.

"We descended along dried-out river channels," Arnett continued, "and one day I almost dislocated my knee. Half a dozen rebels, who called themselves mujahideen, served as our guides. They led us to a detachment based in the mountains near Jalalabad. And they led us, I admit, rapidly. Our complaints of the excessive rate were not considered by anyone: otherwise, the danger threatened of being on open terrain during the day. To put it directly, none of us yearned to be caught by the eye of a crew of your helicopter gunship...."

With a napkin Arnett wiped away the sweat which appeared on his bald spot.

I clicked the assault rifle over to automatic fire.

Arnett took another drink of water and said:

"We soon entered a small village. I asked the guides whether we risk running into a Soviet military patrol here. They only laughed: in their words, at night the villages belong to the mujahideen. Recalled again were the years of work in Vietnam during the war when I was with the armed forces of the United States. There, the villages always belonged to the Viet Cong at night.... We emerged into a small picturesque valley when the sun had already risen and the first Soviet helicopters were circling in the sky. Honestly, Ed and I arrived in Afghanistan to learn if you are winning your first real war since 1945...."

"But how were you not afraid to cross the border illegally?" I asked.

"Of course, someone may say that in crossing the border illegally we broke the law. But such a violation of the law hardly means anything in a country where a war is going on. Western journalists such as Ed and I, having decided to write about the rebels, really had to travel a risky path--first to find the dushman high command in the area of the Pakistan border and then to obtain their agreement to a long trip inside Afghanistan."

"With whom of interest did you meet in Pakistan? And where? Or is this 'Top Secret?'"

"It," he smiled, "is 'Top Secret.' I knew that the outcome of the war in Afghanistan seriously influences the fate of our planet and, therefore, I came here. I, do you see, wanted to learn the truth. All the more since the world knows nothing of the events occurring there. It is one more 'unknown war.' You see, the rebels have no radio so that they could report information about themselves. And among many the weapons were ancient--antediluvian Enfield rifles with a breech mechanism, old submachineguns, and there were accurate copies of Kalashnikovs made by skilled village armorers. And your complete set of combat

power in Afghanistan is present. When a Soviet fighter flies above the mountains searching for a target, the rebels can only hide behind boulders or merge in with the ground with the aid of their coarse robes.... In travelling about Afghanistan, I always remembered the Vietnam war. And I looked for something common between this war and that war which was so disastrous for America. I dealt with Vietnam for 10 years, and analogies with Vietnam were obvious. However, my status here and in Vietnam was absolutely different. For now I was with the rebels with those being pursued. Partisans, it is true, deny any analogy with Vietnam. 'We draw our strength from a faith in Allah,' they said to me. In Afghanistan the wounding of a partisan in the head, chest, or stomach means almost certain death. A hit in an extremity means gangrene and, in the end, amputation."

Arnett drank up his coffee, placed the cup on the plate with the bottom up, and began to wait until the remains ran out.

"Do you want to guess," I asked, "to what other war you will be tossed by fate in the guise of the editor-in-chief?"

"No, I am considerably interested in learning whether OGONEK will publish our today's talk. If it takes the risk, it will become my contribution to our campaign of openness."

"Why are you so concerned about our openness? Be concerned about your own. By the way, how did your Afghan epopee end?"

"One beautiful day we left our hosts," answered Arnett "and so we did not see one of your vehicle columns. All the time the war teased us with its closeness and inaccessibility. Later we crossed the Kunar on rubber rafts. Ed Healey fell over into the turbulent current and soaked all the cameras; true, he managed to save the films heroically here. That is all."

...Nevertheless, I thought looking in the binoculars, I correctly concluded not to start to quarrel with him then. He saw his Afghanistan and I saw mine. Quarrelling in general is one of the most senseless occupations in the life of man. All the more if people participate in the verbal duel who are not striving to understand one another but to consolidate their age-old positions even more strongly. Arnett does not intend to surrender in the 50 positions which he occupies. And, of course, he hardly wants to move over to mine. It is extremely difficult to part in maturity with one's convictions which have become ossified in you like salt deposits. It is all the same that in one's old age one leaves the home in which he was born, grew up, and lived right up to the last day.

Of course, almost each Arnett phrase caused within a responsive reaction and an unrestrainable desire to enter into a quarrel. The analogy with Vietnam did not work if only because Vietnam, located thousands of kilometers from America, never fired on the cities of Florida, California, or New England. Several days ago I visited Pyandzh and up to now I remember that terrible black hole which was formed in the small Tajik house with the tile roof after the death of Zaynidin Norov.

No one called America to Vietnam. But the Afghan leadership requested aid from us 13 times before we decided to offer it. But here I was also drawn into an argument and I had no desire to do it. All the more a back number.

Dzhabbarov unrolled his sleeping bag. He stretched it on his legs and, on top--also his knapsack. At least it seems to be warmer. I followed his example. In the adjacent SPS Sklyar rumbled something made of iron. Most likely, a can of preserved food.

The rebels complained to Arnett that America had forgotten about them. Does Peter really believe what he says? America forgot Vietnam, but slightly, but it remembers about Afghanistan, supplying the most modern weapons to the dushman. In South Baghlan I saw "dukhi" captured equipment, medical equipment and medicine in an underground hospital-fortress, and with my own hands I touched Japanese portable radios over which the bandits conversed an hour prior to the attack on the last city street. Even then I thought: not every regular army is equipped today like the rebel detachments of dushman. At an airfield they showed me a Soviet helicopter which had been shot down a day earlier by a Stinger, and this mobile antiaircraft missile complex is the last word in military "fashion" dictated to the world from the United States. Arnett spoke of the conviction of the rebels in the rightness of their cause and of indestructible faith in Allah. But at interrogations of captured "dukhi" I invariably observed the opposite: they momentarily repudiated, betraying anathema to that which they so passionately spoke about suddenly to the Arnett who desired to become naive. America is buying this "faith." If there were no dollars, there would be no war. America is ready to give the bandits millions if only the conflict continued, if only we remained in Afghanistan. America bought itself this war as it was accustomed to buy everything in general. For the "dukhi" Arnett was the representative of this very America on whose money they are fighting, living, and dissipating life in Peshawar in the intervals between combat operations. They, naturally, lean over backwards to appear convinced "soldiers of Allah" in the eyes of Peter and Ed Healey. As regards the American journalists themselves who like to travel about the Afghan land as "illegals," after special duty in the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] I formed an absolutely specific opinion about them. Especially after I viewed in the MGB a captured video tape taken by one of them. The torture of a Soviet prisoner of war was filmed on the cassette in detail, with the showing with relish of the cruellest and most disgusting details. If I could have gotten my hands on that television journalist then....

"What were you thinking about," Dzhabbarov asks.

"It is already three, and still no bands."

A scorpion is clambering persistently over the rocks of the SPS like a tractor.

"Don't be afraid," Dzhabbarov guesses my thoughts, "for the present he is not very poisonous."

But in any case, Vladik neutralizes the reptile with a butt.

The snow peaks of the mountains are white very far away, almost at the very horizon.

"Some day after the war," dreams Vladik, "they will build a mountain ski resort there and you and I will come to ski among the places of former battles.... All right, eh?"

"Yes, but let them stretch at least 10 funicular lines there," gloomily whispers Sklyar who lay between us, "I will no longer come there on foot! It is better if we meet in the Union. Let us say, at the statue of the three cranes in Tashkent, O.K?"

"Dukhi!" Zherelin suddenly whispers hoarsely.

Droplets of sweat roll down over the hollow of the spinal column like a stream along the bottom of a canyon.

I look in the binoculars: about 20 men are moving in the distance along the channel at a fast rate. All are armed. With what specifically we cannot make out for the present.

Now we are more silent than silence. Only Zherelin raps out something to Kozlov by radio.

We let the band approach us to minimum distance. Nerves are at the limit. Kozlov covers the channel behind them and thereby blocks the ring. If the "dukhi" rush for the "green zone" they will run up against our men. If they attempt to slip between the hills, we will give them a proper reception.

Desperate firing begins below. Dozens of single and long interrupted flashes are flashing. About 10 men from the band rush helter-skelter toward the right bank of the river. Several figures fall. Five or six dushman hit the ground, taking cover behind boulders. In an instant they open fire on the coniform hills, covering those who are breaking through the gap between our and the adjacent hills. The assault rifles of Sklyar and Dzhabbarov roar on the right and on the left. They hit three "dukhi" who are trying to get to the rear of our left flank.

The night is bursting and chattering. Tracers cut the darkness into strips. Several incendiary bullets fall to the left of Zherelin's SPS and the barb wire blazes up instantaneously. Only the radio operator is there. Zherelin himself rushes between the embrasures.

The firing stops below, from the direction of the channel. It looks as though Kozlov extinguished all the firing points.

There is the impression that someone stretched red and yellow wires above the "green zone." The "dukhi" are still firing there. But soon the wires are extinguished. There are no more of them.

The battle lasted for about 10 minutes.

The assault rifles are red hot and the drops of sweat, falling on the iron, sizzle. Everything seems to be like it was formerly. But the moon shined even whiter in the sky.

At this moment firing flares up again on the left: two "dukhi" hit the ground on the rear side of a hill. The left flank of the Zherelin group conducts responsive fire against them from the peak. For a second someone leans out from behind an embrasure and throws something downward with force with his hand. A bright flash and a simultaneous explosion. Fragments strike the rocks with a ringing. The firing stopped. After an instant one more grenade explodes in the same place. It is for good measure.

For a minute we lay silently in our stone horseshoe-shaped embrasures.

Evidently, it is all. And already finally.

For some reason a strange thought is pulsating in the head. What you just did, firing at the "dukhi" with the assault rifle--did you defend or nevertheless attack? Did you want to destroy him or protect your life? If you asked this of the "dukhi" you would hardly get a clear answer. Even if the "dukhi" were alive.

Dzhabbarov again fires a long burst into the darkness as if asking: "Hey! Is someone there or not?" A strong, rolling echo answers him. But with such a delay that it can be taken as responsive fire.

Laying in the center of the channel near a smooth, sidewise boulder shining in the sun with his knees drawn up to his chin was one of those 20 who tomorrow at dawn intended to fire on our airfield with rockets. For some reason Vladykin remembered. How with an easy jog he ran to his helicopter along the runway which was red-hot from the sun.

Who would this person have killed tomorrow, this person who was now laying helplessly at my "kimr," if we had not killed him today? The Afghan's eyes were open and looked with surprise at the sky. As if he wanted to ask about something but could not. The narrow dark-complexioned forehead was still covered by small droplets of sweat. Each of them shined in the moonlight. It now became like a daylight lamp in a morgue.

The chest of another was tattooed finely with the 48th prayer from the Koran. He assumed that this would make him invulnerable. The initial lines of the prayer could be seen through the torn shirt. Later I learned their translation:

"In the name of Allah gracious and merciful!

"We gave you a clear victory,

"so that Allah will pardon you for that which preceded of your sins and what was later and so that he shows his graciousness to you and leads you in the direct manner,

"and so that Allah gives you great help.

"He is the one who brought down (sakin) in the hearts of the believers so that they increased faith from their faith; to Allah belong the armies of heaven and earth; Allah the knowing, wise!..."

"Allah did not help," I thought.

At his bosom lay a heavy flask. A convenient thing: a valve was mounted in the lid and tea could be heated on a campfire directly in it. In addition, the flask contains five soldiers' cups of water. Now you hardly need it.

They say that if a mujahideen died with his face toward the ground it means that he sinned much in life. A third dushman lay with his face buried in the pebbles. Falling, he awkwardly broke his right arm under himself and it seemed that it was very uncomfortable for him to lay like that. With his left hand he held his assault rifle and, in order to pull it out, it was necessary to spread the fingers. A bullet entered his Adam's apple and went all the way through, and the blood slowly flowed downward in a thin stream along the dry channel. A cellophane packet with raisins and walnuts lay in the right pocket of his "Pakistanka."

Hoisting all the captured weapons to our shoulders, we again climbed the hill. The soldiers dispersed to their SPS's and silently took dry rations out of their knapsacks. Dzhabbarov and I moved into an embrasure to Sklyar. He had already opened two cans with sausage meat. From the day's bristles our cheeks and chin became bluish-gray like the scales on a fish's belly.

Only now I understood how he got hungry. Dzhabbarov deftly smeared curdled milk on hardtack and sent pieces of it to the mouth in turn. I took several sips from a captured flask which was filled to the neck with strong green tea. It proved to be a little saltish to the taste.

After about 15 minutes we were already going across the steppe in the opposite direction, spread out in a long extended line and moving toward the APC's. For about an hour I marched on autopilot, thinking of nothing, and sometimes it seemed that I was sleeping. Then, when in the infinite womb of the night the birth of a new day was felt, thought again began to work suddenly. If there had been more "dukhi" in the band the battle could have been protracted. Of course, we were also lucky because before this their detachment was drawn into a long fire fight with another band. How many people did they leave in the mountains? I then remembered Arnett. What would have happened if he travelled about Afghanistan not then, but tonight? Had we met here, in the steppe, and not in his Moscow corporation office our conversation would have gone in quite a different key. "Barricades in various directions," this is what it seemed he said. Yes, Peter, in this case you are correct. Then in Moscow it seemed to me that Afghanistan unites us in something. But tonight it lay as an abyss between us....

If daytime Kabul is single-faced and transparent, in the evening it is filled with secret fascination. And danger only reinforces this sensation. I glanced at the tired, barely illuminated face of the city, shaking in the back seat of the UAZ which rushed me from the airfield to our Soviet trade representative hotel. Next to me sat a man in civilian clothes, also with a tired face covered with a frequent network of red vessels and framed by a stiff gray beard. His high brow was divided into equal parts by several deep wrinkles. I became acquainted with

him a week ago in an airplane which accomplished the Kabul-Kunduz trip. He was a person of a rare mind and head of department of one of the Moscow higher educational institutions. Supporting his elbows on his knees, he looked ahead at the road.

The electrical spots of the shops took off to the left and to the right. They are crammed from an abundance of commodities made in virtually all the countries of the world. Here any currency is accepted except the Mongolian tugriks. Everything could be bought here. At times, it even seemed that if you asked the shopkeeper in fun for a wide-fuselage Boeing-747 he would smile cunningly and pull this two-story huge thing from beneath the floor. And again he will give a wink: "Commodore, a really big reduction only for you!"

When our vehicle stopped, letting other transport pass at intersections, it was possible to see in the little stores filled with yellow light new "Sharps" in cellophane packaging. In looking at them, I did not stop being amazed by the fact that the latest equipment and the native consciousness of the tradesman coexisted separately in the small shop with an area of only two to three square meters without penetrating each other. It turns out that one can wear on the wrist a Seiko with liquid crystals but himself can be the carrier of a pre-feudal psychology. I recalled how Nimatulla, an Afghan fighter pilot, laughed one day: "Yes, I fly in a supersonic airplane but my wife wears a yashmak."

During the day, the shopkeepers hid from the heat in the dark depth of their little stores. And there, in the maw of numerous shops, burned dozens of pairs of their green and blue eyes like small stars in the night sky.

"Do you remember," my neighbor suddenly asked, "a (sura) under the name of 'Night?'"

"It's a sin," I admitted, "but I know the Koran poorly."

"In the name of Allah the gracious and merciful! I swear by the night when it covers...." "I add to this," he scraped the bridge of his nose with his finger, "that there are things which can be perceived only at night."

It was strange to hear this from his mouth. During the day he always hid behind the armor of cold joviality. But now not a trace of it remained.

"Yes," I answered, "at night, isn't it strange, you see farther and more deeply."

It is not good for a person to understand too much. And it is also not good to glance extremely far. Clairvoyance is a tragedy, not a gift. Even the wisest of the wisest loses the sensation of real time. He sees only the future, but not the present.

The UAZ turned sharply to the right, and my neighbor was pressed against the left door. Understanding his thought, I asked:

"But if you were in the place of this 'wise of the wisest' who, let us assume, correctly and profoundly understands the prospects for social development but sees here thousands of people around him living in poverty, backwardness, and almost barbarism, really wouldn't the desire arise in you to help them and accustom them to a higher culture?"

"Personally," my partner in conversation answered without delay, "I am profoundly convinced that barbarism is the opposite of culture only in a system of certain coordinates and ideas created by the same culture. But outside this system barbarism and backwardness signify absolutely nothing different and in no way are the opposite of culture."

I began to open a pack of cigarettes, thus taking a small time out in the argument.

"But if life," I said, striking a match, "is nasty and unfair, it is completely natural to want and try to change it. Isn't that so?"

"Do you see," he hardly opened a small window, "in general I am inclined to be outraged by the objective course of things in the world. It is stupid. It doesn't enter your head to be outraged because the Volga flows in its way and not in another. By the way," he waved a hand, "that also happened. Quite recently."

"I never was an adherent of quietism or relativism. They lead to inaction and paralysis of the will, and this is worse than paralysis of the body. By the way, did you never notice that in the morning the night watches almost always seem to be something like alchemical searches?"

He smiled with the corner of his mouth:

"All right, well to hell with philosophy. It is better if you tell what that you have seen here acted on you the strongest of all."

Actually, what?

And I remembered very early in the morning, the pre-dawn haze. The long runway, almost to the very horizon....

"Reconnaissance!" shouts all over the airfield a round man in the flight uniform of the helicopter pilots, kept with a long peak and notebook in his hands. "Reconnaissance! Let's go!"

We get up slowly, heave the RD¹⁶ on our backs, take our assault rifles and, divided into ship groups of eight men in each, we rush toward the six MI-8's. They stand, wearily dangling their blades. Ahead and behind the "bees" are squeezed in pairs the "bumblebees"—the assault's helicopter gunships.

Each group forms up opposite its helicopter. The commander of our crew, Lieutenant Colonel Plastkov, pulls a headset onto his head and disappears in the cabin. Behind him follow the flight technician, Gorshkov, and the co-pilot-navigator Streltsov.

Gorshkov turns on the storage batteries which "feed" the craft electric power. The left and right engines begin to roar and the rotor turns very slowly, picking up rpm's. Another minute passes, and the engines enter the operating mode, switching from light to heavy gas. Our ship's group is already sitting

¹⁶ RD—paratrooper's knapsack.

and vibrating inside the "bee." Formed up on the homing radio station, all six "Bees" accompanied by four "bumblebees" take off from the runway.

There are 17 minutes of flight to the landing area. Our wave is flying at the lowest possible altitude--five to seven meters above the ground--lifting columns of dense yellow dust. The airfield grows smaller, and the huge tankers are converted into small insects clinging to the runway. We cross a chain of mountains. Rushing by below at a speed of 250 kilometers per hour are plains, villages, and the posts of a broken high-voltage line. They recall the rickety crosses in a cemetery, any of whose graves could become yours.

The plains ended. Now beneath us slip the mountains, becoming all the steeper and more pointed. We pass a canyon which gloomily opened wide its mouth; at this moment you recall an acrobat who stuck his head between the jaws of a lion and who senses with each cell of his skin his stinking breathing.

Our helicopter, firing its thermal target simulators and reducing speed, is the second to descend. The landing area is in pits and bumps, the smallest possible--only seven to nine square meters. And although there is still no vertical turbulence, nevertheless it is with difficulty that Pastkov keeps the helicopter in the hot and therefore even more rarefied high-mountain air. Flight technician Gorshkov flops down with his belly on the bottom, opens the hatch, and sticking his head outside shouts in the interphone headset:

"Altitude two meters--three meters forward! Altitude one meter--half meter to the left! Land!"

Plastikov got a fix on the place. Locking his glance on a bristly bush, he continues to descend, continually squinting at the drift rate meter. A heavy blow.

"Touched with the right!" Gorshkov shouts.

Plastikov reduces the pitch. A second blow.

"The front touched!" The flight technician turns his protective helmet in all directions.

But he is unable to place the third wheel: there is a steep slope below on the left. In addition, a strong wind is hitting the side on the right--most dangerous for a helicopter. Gorshkov jumps to his feet, freeing the exit. We jump out one after the other and, spreading out in a fan, we run forward, away from the chattering helicopter, and we bend down, pulling our heads into our shoulders so they are not sliced off by the rotor.

Our MI-8 climbs sharply into the sky and the next one lands in its place. We take cover behind rocks, in any case surveying with our eyes the peaks of the adjacent mountains from which empty "dukhi" embrasures stare at us. Small pebbles beneath me stick into the elbows and knees and the wind raised by the helicopters tries to separate us from the panama hat and RD and makes the cliff round with dust and fine particles.

"Look to see that forehead is not struck," someone shouts to be from behind.

About 100 meters behind us the helicopter gunships are standing patrol and formed up in a circle. Their roar acts calmingly, like a pill of a strong tranquilizer.

The last "bee" of our wave remains about 50 meters from the landing area. Cutting back on the speed and applying afterburning, it begins to accomplish its approach. Suddenly an unexpected jerk to the left, a flash beneath its rotor and an explosion muffled by the roar of the "humblebees." The "bee," evidently still not understanding what had happened, proceeded downward along the slope so as to gain speed and make a new approach. In trying to reduce the reactive moment the crew reduces the thrust of the main rotor, but at the very beginning of the second loop the helicopter strikes the slope with the cabin, turns very slowly to the left, banks to the right side, and drops its nose simultaneously. A second, even stronger blow with the left side--and the blades, striking the dirt with a fragmenting crack, fly out in different directions and slash the cliffs. The helicopter, catching onto stones, continues to slide downward along the slope and the paratroopers jump from it while it is moving. I hear how the heartbeats alternate with the strikes of the helicopter against the boulders. A second later, the helicopter crew rolls out through the blisters. The sensation is one as if they just put you yourself out of action and it was you who rolled down along the slope, catching the cliff with weakening fingers....

"It," I noted, ending my story, "had a depressing effect on me. Perhaps because breaking into pieces and falling into the canyon helplessly, the 'bee' appeared to me as some strange symbol of hope crumbled to smithereens."

My companion was silent, saying not a word. The commandant's hour had already operated in the city long ago and several times Afghan military patrols landed in the intersections. However, the pass which was glued to the windshield of the UAZ freed us from the necessity to stop. Silence descended on the city together with the night but in the ears there nevertheless remained the awful metal scraping of the helicopter which rolled into the abyss.

We reached the USSR trade delegation only at 0100 hours. Saying goodbye, I climbed out of the vehicle and set off for the control post.

I did not have any documents with me and my external appearance--dirty "kinrs", crumpled military uniform, hair dishevelled and hardened from sweat--so contrasted with the classical appearance of a trade delegation worker that the duty officer in the hut refused to open the door for a long time. Then I got tired of proving to him that before him was not a dushman but a correspondent of OGONEK and, sitting on the counter, I said:

"Come on, I am falling off my feet."

Psychology is a strange thing. Especially the psychology of the duty officers at control posts: you never know what influences them. However the words, "Come on, I am falling off my feet," appeared convincing to the guard of the trade delegation and he opened the door, barking out after me:

"The devil may be different, but he is the same demon."

Taking a shower in my room, I crawled into bed and put out the light. From the window one floor higher sang Pugacheva:

I know, darling, I know that with you
I lost myself, you lost yourself.
You left the shore of your homeland.
And you never came to another....

Then they turned Pugacheva off. She was replaced by a mullah who shouted something through a sound amplifier to all of Kabul. Two universes which found themselves alongside one another in the same city: fantastic cohabitation.

I just couldn't sleep. I glanced over the room in search of something light to read. On the only shelf lay a file of sickly last-year's journals and, alongside, the first 10 volumes of the Collected Works of Marx and Engels. A bookmark stuck out from the seventh volume. I took it and immediately opened to page 422. Crumpling the bookmark, I threw it into a copper ash tray on the journal table. One of the paragraphs was marked with pencil. I began with it:

"The worst thing of all which can face the leader of an extreme party is the forced necessity to have power when the movement has still insufficiently matured for the dominance of the class which it represents and for the conduct of measures which ensure this domination. What he can do depends not on his will but on the level which was attained by the contradictions between various classes and on the degree of development of the material conditions of life and the relations of production and exchange which always also determine the degree of development of class contradictions. What he should do and what his own party requires of him depends nevertheless not on he himself but also not on the degree of development of the class struggle and the conditions which engender it; it is connected with the doctrines and requirements already put forth by him and which nevertheless follow not from a given relationship of social classes and not from a given, in greater or lesser measure chance, state of the conditions of production and exchange, but are the fruit of a more or less deep understanding by him of the general results of the social and political movement. Thus, he inevitably finds himself before an unresolvable dilemma: what he can do contradicts all of his former statements, his principles, and the direct interests of his party; and what he should do is impracticable. In short, he is forced to represent not his party and not his class, but that class for the domination of which the movement has already matured sufficiently at the given moment. In the interests of the movement itself he should defend the interests of a class alien to him and shake off his class with phrases, promises, and assurances that the interests of the other class are his own. The one who once landed in this false position perished irretrievably...."

Slamming the book shut, I recalled my recent conversation partner and our night argument with him.

I flew out of Kabul the next morning. It was hot and stifling. The white sun had begun to fry the city very early and, when I reached the airport, the air already shivered over its red-hot runways. I threw my suitcase close to the ramp, the steps of which led to the sky. On its other side, in the shade, talked Major Novikov and Lieutenant Colonel Leonov with whom I had become acquainted two

weeks ago near South Baghlan. Novikov offered me a thermos with coffee but before taking a drink I examined it suspiciously, trying to unscrew the bottom.

"Why such precaution?" Leonov inquired.

I related the story of the thermos with the plastic explosive which was found in the dugout of South Baghlan and we all laughed.

Prior to Afghanistan Leonov served in Belorussia. His family is there even now. Last summer he travelled there on leave. And although one day is given for the journey, he was stuck in Dushanbe for almost three days: as always, there were no tickets.

"I sit in a restaurant," Leonov softened a cigarette with his fingers, "with the deputy regimental commander. He asks me: 'How about you, Petrovich, do you always whirl?' And I say: 'Yes, someone is always sneaking behind me.' He smiled: 'Like a waiter. You did more than your share of fighting, brother...' I remember, I walk about Dushanbe and I note that I mechanically walk about and avoid all green plantings. I arrived home and did not close my eyes for the first two nights: I could not sleep, and everything is here although I know that I am devilishly tired. And when on the third day training firing began close to the military post, I fell asleep in an instant. Like I was killed. Well, as usual, each one had 100 questions for me. I even decided to write on cards answers of the type: 'Yes, I think soon,' 'No, I don't know him,' '(Khrenovo)', 'Yes, leave me alone!...' So as to show them and not wear out the tongue once again. I spent the leave well. But any trifles spoiled the mood. It would be as if on your native soil you want to kiss it and here suddenly because of some air ticket you have a lot of trouble getting home, they want to send everyone to A ticket to Moscow on the black market in Dushanbe costs 200 rubles. Yes, you can suffocate with these two hundred, only let me see my wife sooner!"

"In Tashkent it is no better." Novikov drew deeply on his cigarette. "My reservation for a ticket to Kharkov proved to be invalid--although I complained in the middle of the station! And here alongside, right behind the dispatcher's taxi, is a group of civilians--they stand and converse in a whisper. I approach, hands folded like a funnel, and I shout: 'Citizen speculators! Who can offer a ticket to Kharkov?' A second later one runs up and whispers in the ear with a dribbling mouth: 'Not so loud, comrade major, for after the decree on non-labor income it is so risky....' Here I suffered: 'Is it you who shames your mother who takes the risk?' He compressed himself into a lump. I began to pity him. What was the sense in arguing with him about risk?... I thrust a hundred at him and, in return, eight hours later I was already knocking on the door to my home."

Our conversation was interrupted by the roar of a transport.

"It looks like it is for you," I said.

We shook hands. Soon Novikov and Leonov mixed in with a group of other military personnel who were awaiting departure on this same flight. After about 10 minutes the airplane was already high above Kabul. Looking at how the small dot

which quite recently roared over the entire city with its engines hides in the sky, I sat on one of the steps of the ramp.

I thought about all that heap of stable subconscious associations which a person carries out of Afghanistan. You see in a store how the fan on the ceiling listlessly cut with its blades through the summer stifling air above the meat counter and you feel that something is flashing in the memory, that something clearly is missing. Well of course, the blades are missing the sound accompaniment--the fragmenting roar of the helicopter engines.

Or suddenly the predawn Moscow quiet is broken by the furious burst of a machine-gun. You return from a distant Afghan dream, rub the eyes, and only then you understand: it is nothing, be calm, old man, it is simply a motorcyclist and his rig who is racing without a muffler. You will perceive the words "green zone," "zinc," "berries," and "yoghurt"¹⁷ absolutely differently from your relatives. Afghanistan steals them from you. Dozens of new words will appear the true meaning of which no one will guess except those in whose breast pocket the invisible membership card of the frontline brotherhood will always lay. Afghanistan will forever take from you such seemingly peaceful words as "bee", "bumblebee," "martin," "rook," "merry," "elephant," "gull," "milk," "sour cream," "canned goods...." Afghanistan will move into your subconscious and, from there, will pursue you day and night. Some completely inoffensive detail (even the noise of a motorcycle) drags behind you an entire huge number of memories and associations like the tail of stifling discharges which are visible to you but in no way to your fascinating companion.

Or a neighbor's son rings your doorbell.

"Uncle, look." he says and he extends a small black tulip. "The gardner told us to place the flower in an inkwell overnight--and look what happened!"

But the flower which which absorbed the ink causes no delight in you.

The times of Afghanistan will again be reality for you, and the surrounding world--only an illusion, a dream. In Moscow, before my official trip to Afghanistan I became acquainted with a pilot who worked in the DRA on a "rook," had more than 150 combat sorties behind him, and was decorated with two Orders of the Red Star. When walking along the Moscow boulevards he very attentively looks under his feet as if looking for something. For a long time I could not understand

¹⁷ According to conventional terminology which has been adopted among the Soviet servicemen in the DRA, the words presented further mean: "green zone"--terrain covered by green vegetation where dushman usually hide; "berries"--people; "yoghurt"--diesel fuel; "bee"--Mi-8 helicopter; "bumblbee"--helicopter gunship; "martin"--SU-17; "rook"--SU-25; "merry"--MIG-21; "elephant"--tank; gull--vehicle; "milk"--kerosene; "sour cream"--gasoline; "canned goods"--mines: "black tulip"--one of the rear services.

what the matter was and I also looked fixedly at the sidewalk. But I noticed nothing under his and my feet except candy wrappers, puddles, and leaves rotting in them. Soon everything became clear. Locking on a reference point (for example, a cigarette butt), he mentally calculates the point to put a fighter into a dive in such a way that the aiming point lies above the cigarette butt and the only correct angle of attack is obtained. In addition, he explained, it is necessary to exactly select the correct moment for dropping the bombs. For a long time this exercise absorbed all his attention and really made his relatives and wife nervous.

In the summer, you go to rest with your wife in the Crimea. But on seeing Karadag, in addition to the will your brain itself determines the most advantageous positions for a machinegun.

And one day, when you finally and irrevocably get confused in the labyrinth of a detective novel, like once in the village of Malyan-Gulyam, you are attracted (I'm not laughing!) to poetry: you reach the first volume which you come across from the shelf. It turns out to be Pushkin. Just before going to bed you begin to read from the middle"

...The horses again dashed off;
The hand bell din-din-din....
I see: the "dukhi" assembled
Among the whitening plains.

But you only run up against the word "dukhi" and in an instant the imagination replaces the galloping horses with APC's, the hand bell by the clank of their tracks, the whitening plains--by yellow sands. You slam the book shut and throw it on the bed: Now you don't have Pushkin with you, either. At least, this poem.

You save up your money, go to the store, and you finally purchase a "Zenit." But pressing the release button of the brand new camera for the first time, you are absolutely frankly amazed that there is no recoil.

And at night you will fall asleep with the sensation of a trigger on your index finger. But if you are lucky, in about five or six months you will learn to look at all this calmly, without excess emotions.

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